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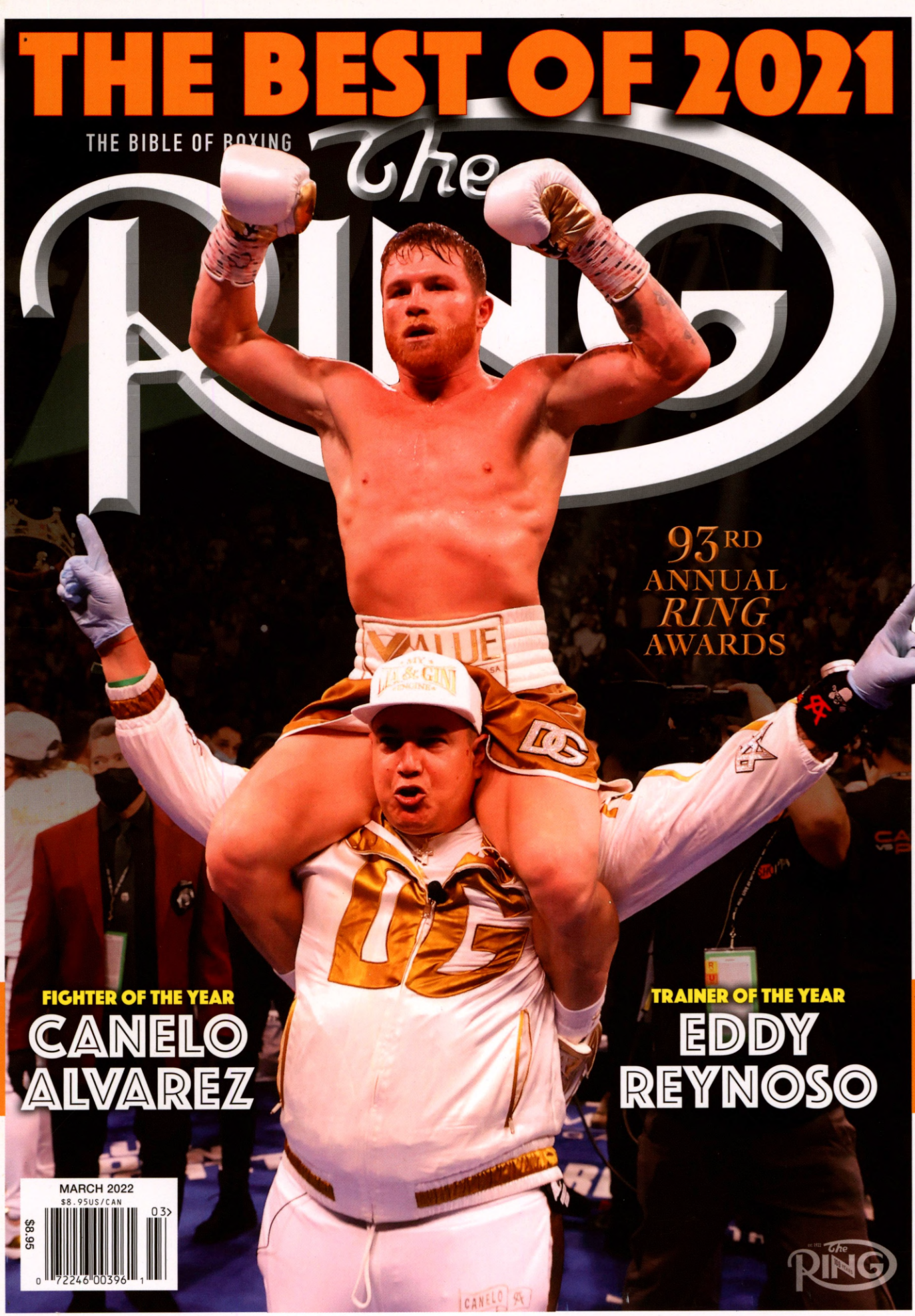

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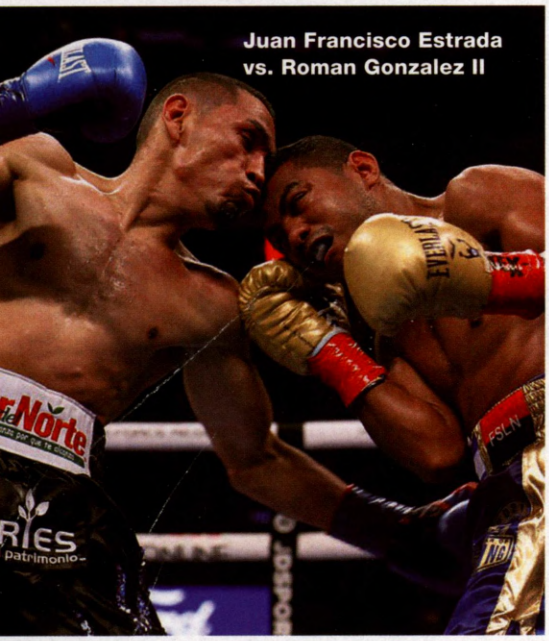
Canelo is super middleweight king.

COVER PHOTO BY AL BELLO

OPENING SHOT

Just as moviegoers got another dose of Neo this holiday season, boxing fans were treated to their own *Matrix Resurrection* in Vasiliy Lomachenko's vintage display of bewildering footwork and pinpoint accuracy in his unanimous decision over Richard Commey on December 11.

MIKEY WILLIAMS/TOP RANK


Juan Francisco Estrada vs. Roman Gonzalez II

REQUEST DENIED

There are two weight classes that I follow very heavily: super flyweight (junior bantamweight) and heavyweight. Two very different weight classes, but two that brought us many thrills, both historically and currently. This year has been no different. On March 13, Juan Francisco Estrada vs. Roman "Chocolatito" Gonzalez 2 took place; it was a tremendous fight and for the majority of the year, everyone believed it would win FOTY, hands down.

But fast-forward to October 9, another fight took place that changed everything. Tyson Fury vs. Deontay Wilder 3 was a fight no one wanted after Fury had dominated Wilder on two separate occasions, but afterwards, no one could believe what had transpired after both men hit the canvas and we got a Knockout of the Year contender. I, however, was more disgusted than shocked. For most of the fight, Fury completely dominated Wilder to the point where I thought Wilder would get killed. The knockdowns by Wilder in Round 4 made me believe for a second that we would have a potential upset on our hands, but after that, it was pure domination from Fury. This is why I ask you, the staff of The Ring Magazine, to not elect Wilder-Fury 3 as your Fight of the Year. There were a handful of other fights this year that are more deserving of that moniker, like Castaño-Charlo, Kambosos-Lopez, Fulton-Figueroa, and of course, Estrada-Chocolatito 2. All of these fights not only had two-sided action and were breathtaking fights, but they had much more at stake than Wilder-Fury 3 did. I am aware that Fury and Wilder are eye-catchers, and heavyweights usually steal the show, but there are so many better candidates out there which are more worthy of FOTY. Please consider my request.

K. Lopez
California

EDITOR'S RESPONSE: I understand your point, K. I really do. I was ringside for Estrada-Gonzalez 2 and it remains the best fight I witnessed (live or remotely) in 2021. It's one of the best fights I've ever seen, period. However, I can't deny that Fury-Wilder 3 produced pulse-pounding drama that captivated a worldwide audience in real time. That's the power of the glamour division when its best fighters clash. It appeals to more than just the boxing purists and hardcore afficionados. Heavyweight championship rivalries often transcend the sport. That's one of the reasons boxing was as mainstream as it was during the 1970s when Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman and a number of formidable contenders engaged in their round-robin. Ali-Frazier I and III clearly deserved The Ring's Fight of the Year recognition in 1971 and 1975. However, the award went to heavyweight bouts that weren't nearly as competitive in five other years during the decade. Foreman's two-round destruction of Frazier, which got the honor in 1973, was about as one-sided as a prizefight can get. But, again, the significance of that brutal changing of the guard had an impact on the entire sport, so I understand the editors' choice. Foreman lost The Ring's 1974 Fight of the Year to Ali, a historic bout that was really more of an Upset of the Year (but that honor wouldn't become one of the publication's annual awards until 1980). Two years later, Foreman was on the triumphant side of a traditional Fight of the Year when he outlasted Ron Lyle in an epic five-round shootout. But the next year, Big George would be on the losing side of another Fight of the Year that was more of an Upset of the Year when he was outpointed by Jimmy Young. And the year after that, Leon Spinks would shock an aging Ali in a 15-round bout that was more UOTY than FOTY. I'm sure there were better fights in 1978 than Ali-Spinks I, but I'm old enough to remember the excitement it generated and the widespread media coverage the result received. Fury-Wilder 3 did the same thing in 2021.

Thank you for The Ring's special issues – first Julio Cesar Chavez, then Felix "Tito" Trinidad. I can understand why Tito is idolized in Puerto Rico like Chavez is in Mexico. Good as he was, Tito caught Pernell Whitaker when "Sweet Pea" was slightly past his prime. Chavez had no such luck. One question: Since Trinidad vs. Fernando Vargas was not the Fight of the Year for 2000, what was? Trinidad was later shut out and TKO'd by Bernard Hopkins. B-Hop didn't beat Trinidad because he was bigger; he beat him because he was smarter.

Wise E. Gardner II
Hampton, Va.

EDITOR'S RESPONSE: The Ring's 2000 Fight of the Year was the first clash between Erik Morales and Marco Antonio Barrera. Having been ringside for both Morales-Barrera I and Trinidad-Vargas, I can tell

you that the editors got that one right. While the junior middleweight showdown featured more drama and punching power, the Mexican un-Civil War at 122 pounds featured the fiercest sustained back-and-forth action (at an elite technical level) I've ever witnessed.

I could not believe the article on all-time rankings ("Division by Division," December 2021 issue). It was an absolute joke. Joe Calazaghe ranked at the top is unfathomable. His claim to fame is Mikkel Kessler, who beat nobody. He beat up on two former champions way past their prime. Please. The Ring can do better than this. Most Americans don't even know who Calzaghe is.

James McManus
Philadelphia

WRITER ANSON WAINWRIGHT'S RESPONSE: Thank you for your message, James. Joe's title reign began with a coming-of-age win over Chris Eubank. Although his early title reign was a bit of a slow burn, he beat some solid former world titleholders in Richie Woodhall and Byron Mitchell. He also appeared on Showtime on a handful of occasions, so he wasn't completely unknown to American boxing fans. The win over unbeaten Jeff Lacy was particularly eye-catching. At the time, Lacy was viewed as a mini-Mike Tyson; Calzaghe's win over him was a master class. The Kessler win you mentioned was equally impressive; he drew over 50,000 fans for an iconic night at a stadium in his hometown. Kessler was also unbeaten and widely regarded inside the sport. Going in, it was 50-50. After six rounds, the fight was evenly poised. However, Calzaghe changed game plans and was able to win much of the second half of the fight to score a memorable win. Roy Jones Jr. jumped to light heavyweight, and while he was otherworldly good at 168, it was the panel's belief that his resume wasn't as good at this weight. He made five defenses, Calzaghe made 21. It's a similar scenario with Andre Ward. Pull up those fights on YouTube, James; I'm sure you'll be impressed.

The mythical pound-for-pound title might be better described as the mystical P4P title, because all of the boxing fans I know – many quite knowledgeable – have conflicting views regarding how these elite fighters are selected. Is The Ring's decision-making process subjective (e.g., ring generalship) or objective (e.g., number of knockouts) or a mixture of both? I suggest that The Ring can do a great service to boxing fans everywhere by publishing, in its "How Our Ratings Are Compiled" section, the criteria used by the magazine's editorial board and its outside panel of journalists to determine the 10 best P4P fighters. It would explain why someone like Vasiliy Lomachenko dropped from first to ninth in the list.

Vincent J. Cirillo
North Brunswick, NJ

EDITOR'S RESPONSE: Maybe a complete explanation somewhere in the magazine is a good idea for the future. For now, we'll just say that within the pound-for-pound debates, whenever the subject arises (as it did in this month's ratings update), panel members usually discuss the proper ratio of subjective to objective criteria – and often disagree. As you say, it's a mythical list and people have differing views on the "rules."

Teofimo Lopez says he won the Kambosos fight 10 rounds to two, but the expression on his face and his body language for most of the fight says he knew he lost. His interview after the fight was disgraceful and embarrassing. Lopez got exposed as a sore loser.

Victor Rivero

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RINGSIDE BY DOUG FISCHER

A YEAR OF DISAPPOINTMENTS AND PLEASANT SURPRISES

Not many people expected George Kambosos Jr. to be draped in belts after facing Teofimo Lopez.

As 2020 came to a close, we had no idea how healthy the boxing industry would be in the New Year due to the ongoing pandemic, but we knew what fights we wanted to see. Teofimo Lopez and Tyson Fury, The Ring's 2020 co-Fighters of the Year, were poised for bigger things in 2021.

Lopez, who lifted the Ring Magazine lightweight championship and three major belts from Vasiliy Lomachenko, had three high-profile rivals – Devin Haney, Gervonta Davis and Ryan Garcia – that hardcore fans were salivating to see him defend his unified crown against once he'd taken care of IBF mandatory challenger George Kambosos Jr.

Fury, who seized the WBC heavyweight title and regained the Ring belt with a seven-round demolition of rival Deontay Wilder in their rematch, was all set to battle fellow British superstar Anthony Joshua in an anticipated clash for the undisputed championship.

We didn't get Fury-Joshua. We didn't get any matchup between Lopez, Haney, Davis or Garcia. (It almost looked like we wouldn't get Lopez-Kambosos, which was postponed countless times until it finally landed on Thanksgiving weekend.) We didn't get Terence Crawford vs. Errol Spence (or even Spence vs. Manny Pacquiao). We didn't get Artur Beterbiev vs. Dmitry Bivol. We didn't get Gennadiy Golovkin vs. Jermall Charlo, Demetrius Andrade or any notable middleweight. We didn't get Naoya Inoue vs. any notable bantamweight.

Why? COVID-19 was certainly a factor. So was boxing's broken business model. And so were complacent and entitled boxers as well as their greedy handlers.

But 2021 wasn't a total bummer. In fact, the biggest disappointments led to the most entertaining surprises, some of which were

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recognized with The Ring's year-end awards that you'll read about in this issue.

Kambosos proved to be the real deal. The rugged and crafty Australian pushed Lopez to the limit in one of the best fights of 2021, which gave us a new lightweight champ. A week later, Haney defended his WBC belt by outpointing a game Joseph Diaz Jr., while Davis planted his flag in the 135-pound division with a hard-fought decision over Isaac Cruz. Haney and Davis gained valuable experience and the lightweight division gained three players it didn't have in 2020 (Kambosos, Diaz and Cruz).

Fury-Wilder 3 was the trilogy that nobody asked for, but by the time the protracted grudge match was upon us, a legion of fans and insiders had "gut feelings" that the American super-puncher would knock out his mercurial nemesis, who may have grown soft during his 20-month victory lap. Their guts were almost proved correct during a wild Round 4 that turned what would have been another one-sided beating into an "epic" heavyweight slugfest for this era.

I don't think Fury-Wilder 3 was one of the best fights ever, as some of my peers exclaimed in the moment, but I'm glad it happened.

We didn't get Fury-Joshua, but we got a new heavyweight player in Oleksandr Usyk.

We didn't get Spence-Crawford, but we finally saw Bud share the ring with a worthy 147-pound opponent, the battle-tested Shawn Porter, who, in a gutsy losing effort, confirmed that Crawford is the elite welterweight we figured he was.

We didn't get Spence-Pacquiao, but we got a new welterweight player in Yordenis Ugas, who had been criminally underrated prior to his unexpected late-notice shot at the 42-year-old all-time great.

But the surprises weren't the only positives of 2021. Undisputed champions were crowned at junior welterweight and super middleweight. Josh Taylor rose to the occasion vs. tough-and-determined Jose Ramirez, proving that Ring champs are the real champs, and also earning a much-deserved spot in the mythical pound-for-pound rankings. Canelo Alvarez fought with the frequency of elite boxers from the 1990s, annexing all of the major 168-pound titles within an 11-month span while wielding his free agency like a prime Sugar Ray Leonard.

We almost had a third undisputed champ crowned in 2021, but the entertaining junior middleweight showdown between Jermell Charlo and Brian Castano ended in a draw.

We also got partial title unification bouts of the highest quality at 115 and 122 pounds. I thought my man Chocolatito clearly outpointed Juan Francisco Estrada in a great rematch and I believe that Brandon Figueroa did enough to earn a close decision over Stephen Fulton, but I didn't complain (much) about either official verdict because the matchups delivered Fight of the Year candidates.

The partial unifications weren't limited to men's boxing. Chantelle Cameron unified two major 140-pound belts with a one-sided decision over Mary McGee, and Mikaela Mayer did the same with two major 130-pound titles with an equally lopsided points victory over Maiva Hamadouche, which should have been closer on the official scorecards. Cameron and Mayer won inaugural Ring Magazine women's titles in their respective weight classes, and Mayer-Hamadouche, which was televised live on ESPN, was one of the best fights of the year.

Only time will tell if the surprises and unification bouts of 2021 have set the table for fan-satisfaction in 2022, but I'm hopeful given the industry news and rumors that were buzzing as we went to press.

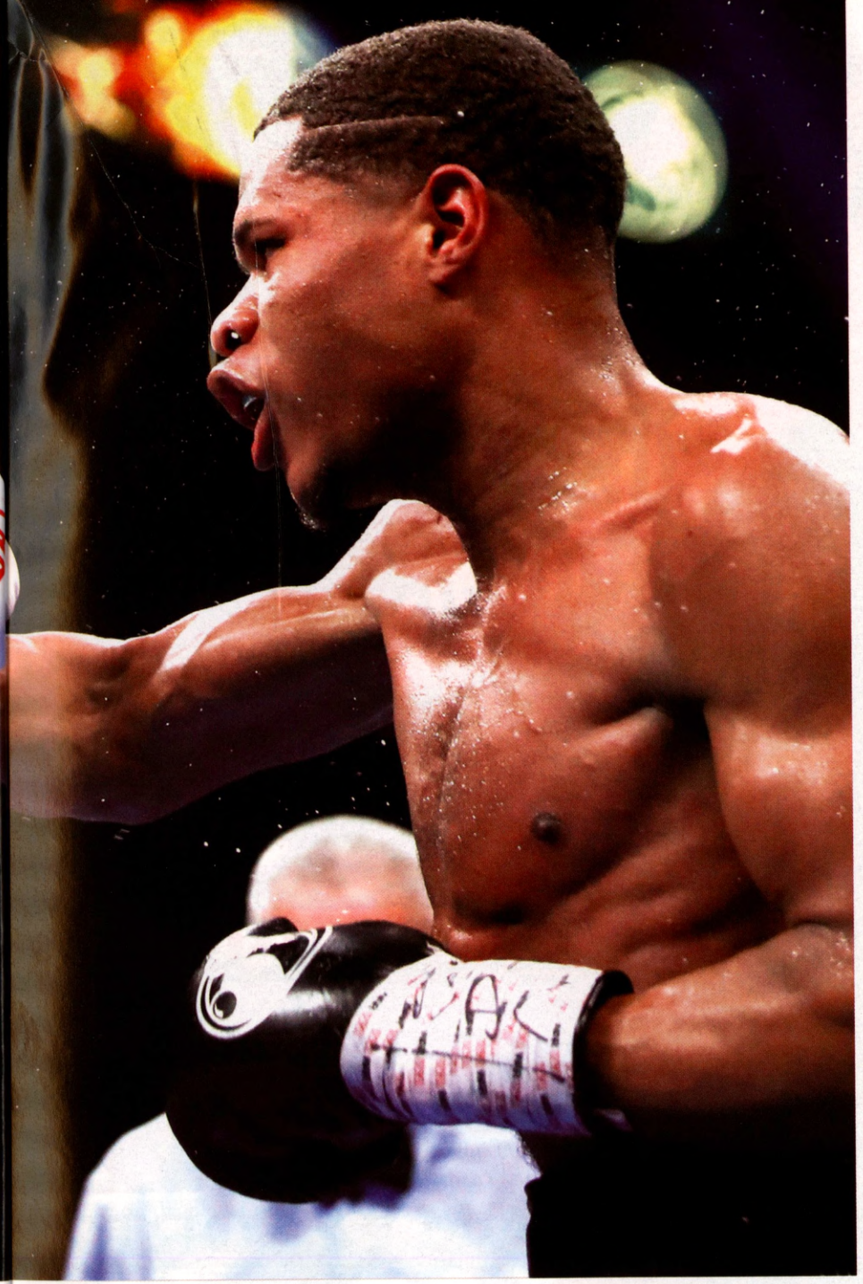
The Estrada-Gonzalez rubber match is reportedly in the works for January or February. Fulton, as you will read about in this issue, is focused on either taking on Murodjon Akhmadaliev in a three-belt unification bout (that would also crown The Ring's 122-pound champ) or facing former unified beltholder Danny Roman in an intriguing mandatory defense.

A Charlo-Castano rematch has been agreed to for February 26 in Houston, according to ESPN.com. There's talk of Shakur Stevenson, who looked like a future world-beater while dominating Jamel Herring for a 130-pound belt, taking on Lomachenko, who regained his wizardly form and taunting confidence by outclassing lightweight contenders Masayoshi Nakatani and Richard Commey. There's also some chatter of a Ryan Garcia-Isaac Cruz fight.

Sign me up for all of that. And sign me up for whoever Canelo winds up fighting.

Canelo and his trainer/manager, Eddy Reynoso, pulled a boss move when they received permission to challenge for the WBC cruiserweight title during the sanctioning organization's annual convention. Hopefully, the announcement did more than just trigger Canelo's salty detractors on Twitter. I think it was meant to send a message to the top fighters from 160 to 175 pounds who are currently waiting around for the pound-for-pound king to pull their name from a hat. Hopefully, the talented-but-complacent likes of Jermall Charlo, Demetrius Andrade, David Benavidez, Dmitry Bivol and Artur Beterbiev understand that they need to fight each other in order to EARN their shots at the Mexican star.

Lastly, Spence and Ugas have reportedly agreed to terms for a three-belt welterweight unification showdown in March or April. I'm not going to hold my breath for the winner to face Crawford, but I'm looking forward to the fight and all the surprises that 2022 may bring.



STEVE MARCUS

Devin Haney's stock (and Ring ranking) rose with his victory over Joseph Diaz Jr.

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JABS AND STRAIGHT WRITES

BY THOMAS HAUSER

TYSON FURY AND POUND-FOR-POUND

The October 9 championship bout between Tyson Fury and Deontay Wilder was sensational. But I disagree with people who've put Fury on their pound-for-pound lists in the aftermath of that fight.

Fury is a massive man. He has skills and uses his size well. Because of his size, he'd be an intriguing opponent in a fantasy tournament involving all-time heavyweight greats.

Because of his size.

Among contemporary fighters, imagine Fury against an equally sized Canelo Alvarez. Or Terence Crawford. Suppose Oleksandr Usyk was the same size as Fury. Is there anyone on the planet other than members of Team Fury who think Tyson would beat an equally sized Usyk? Or any other equally sized top-10 P4P fighter?

Gatti-Ward I was a great fight. But when it was over, no one suggested that Micky Ward belonged on a pound-for-pound list. The same holds true here.

Give Fury credit for beating Deontay Wilder (who has power, heart and significant deficiencies as a fighter). Give Fury credit for climbing off the canvas to win a tough fight. The Gypsy King is The Man in the heavyweight division today. But let's not get carried away. Sugar Ray Robinson (the original pound-for-pound king) he ain't.

Fury halted Wilder for the second time in October.

★ ★ ★

One of many problems with state athletic commissions today is that most regulators have no idea what it's like to be in a fight. Or if they do, they're often retired boxers who were put in their positions as window dressing and lack the administrative skills to do the job.

Greg Sirb has spent his life in combat sports.

Greg Sirb (who has been executive director of the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission since 1989) brings the best of both worlds to his position. Complementing his work in Pennsylvania, Sirb served as president of the Association of Boxing Commissions for six years. In 2018, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored him with the James A. Farley Award for Honesty and Integrity. He also has a background as a participant in combat sports.

Sirb's primary sport was wrestling. In his senior year at Sharon High School in Pennsylvania, he compiled a 30-1 record, losing only in the second round of the state championships. Then, wrestling at Edinboro State College at 118 pounds, he had a career mark of "something like 78 wins and 11 losses" and earned NAIA All-American honors in 1979. That same year, he finished fourth in the national championships.

"I was not a nice person in those days," Greg recalls, "because I was always cutting weight."

Between the ages of 14 and 20, Sirb also boxed at weights ranging from 112 to 115 pounds.

"My record was about 20 wins and six losses," he recalls. "I had a few knockouts at 112, but most of my wins were by decision. I got stopped once in Youngstown, Ohio. Eventually, Edinboro put a kibosh on the boxing."

Sirb's background in combat sports informs everything he does at the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission. To take one example, he knows from personal experience how hard it can be for a combatant to make weight.

"Sometimes I see these guys," Greg says. "They're pale. Their cheeks are sunken. They might even be unsteady on their feet. Because I went through the same thing, I'm sensitive to the issues and dangers involved."

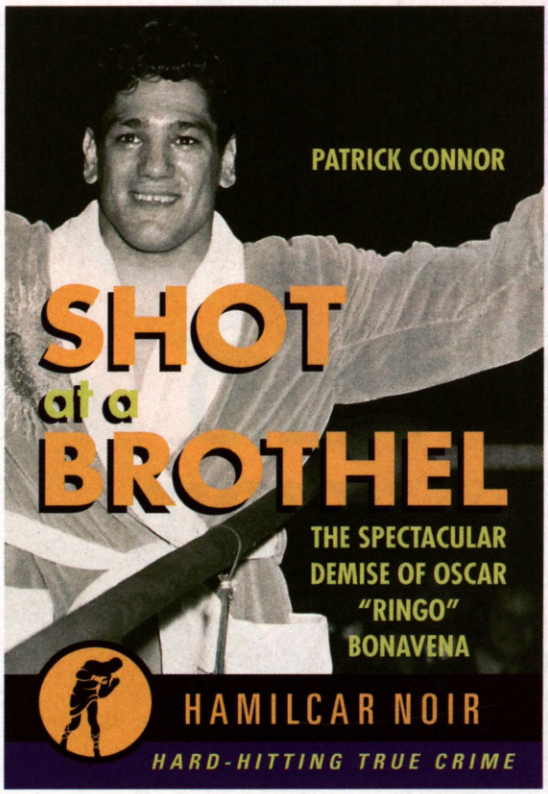
And there's another thought Sirb has to share that flows from his experience as a participant in

combat sports.

"I think every young boy should box or wrestle for at least one or two years to get that feel of one-on-one competition," Greg says. "I feel very strongly about that."

★ ★ ★

Shot at a Brothel: The Spectacular Demise of Oscar "Ringo" Bonavena by Patrick Connor is the sixth book to be published as part of the Hamilcar Noir True Crime Library.



Bonavena was a big, strong, crude heavyweight from Argentina who compiled a 58-9-1 (44 KOs) ring record in the 1960s and '70s but lost the fights that mattered most. Those losses included two defeats by decision against Joe Frazier and a 15th-round stoppage at the hands of Muhammad Ali (the only time that Bonavena was knocked out). He was shot to death at the Mustang Ranch (a brothel in Reno) in the early morning hours of May 22, 1976.

The primary villain in Connor's telling is Joe Conforte. Conforte had ties to organized crime, was deeply involved in prostitution and benefited from an intricate web of alliances with state and local officials. "I'm not saying that I bribe officials or anything like that," Conforte explained in the book. "I don't bribe officials. But it doesn't hurt to be on good terms with them."

The shotgun blast that killed Bonavena was triggered by Willard Ross Brymer, who pleaded no contest to a charge of involuntary manslaughter. The prosecution recommended that he be given a 10-year prison sentence. The judge saw things differently and imposed a two-year term. Brymer was paroled after serving less than 18 months.

Shot at a Brothel is a workmanlike effort that moves along at a linear pace. The players never really come to life, and the story is told without the drama that one might expect from such a lurid set of facts. Also, there are too many factual errors. For example, Connor writes that Muhammad Ali was "largely bankrolled by the Nation of Islam." In reality, the converse was true.

Still, Shot at a Brothel offers two footnotes tied to the culture of the 1960s that are worthy of mention.

First, Bonavena's nickname was Ringo – traditionally a name of Japanese origin that means apple. Ringo Starr of The Beatles (aka Richard Starkey) was given the name because of the number of rings he wore. Bonavena was referenced as Ringo because of his shaggy Beatles-like hair.

And second, Bonavena was not shy about voicing his opinion when Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis (one of the richest men in the world at the time) married Jacqueline Kennedy (President Kennedy's widow). Jacqueline Kennedy was seen by many as the ultimate trophy wife. Bonavena saw things differently and declared, "I don't understand Onassis. He got so much money. Why he got old girl?"

★ ★ ★

Steve Lott died on November 6 at age 71. Most boxing fans didn't know him. But he played a unique role in the history of the sweet science.

For years, Steve worked with Bill Cayton and Jim Jacobs, helping them build Big Fights Inc. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of their massive fight film library and the history that was embodied in it.

Steve was also Bill and Jim's point person in dealing with fighters, most notably Mike Tyson. He shared an apartment with Mike for several years and was in his corner during the years when Tyson was at his best as a boxer. He was devoted to Mike, in and out of the ring, and never stopped caring about him.

There was one quality that was particularly appealing about Steve. He was extraordinarily generous with his time and knowledge. Time and again over the years, I'd call him with questions about a particular fighter or fight. It could be something as simple as whether or not a film of a given fight existed. If it did, Steve would know about it. And as often as not, a VHS tape of the fight arrived unsolicited in the mail several days later.

Steve loved boxing. He was loyal to his friends and a good person.

Thomas Hauser's email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – Broken Dreams: Inside Another Year Inside Boxing – was just published by the University of Arkansas Press. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored Hauser with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism. In 2019, he was selected for boxing's highest honor — induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

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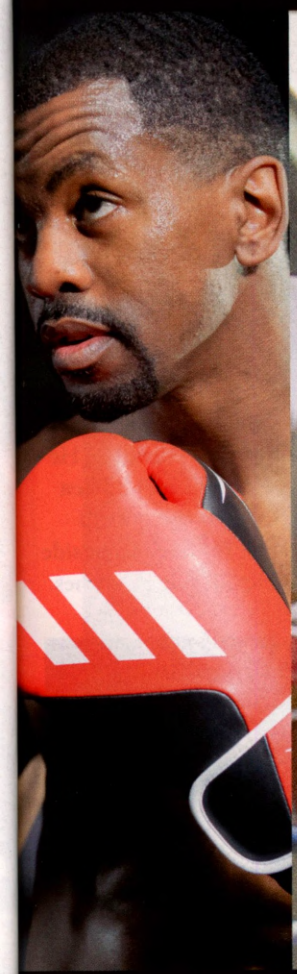

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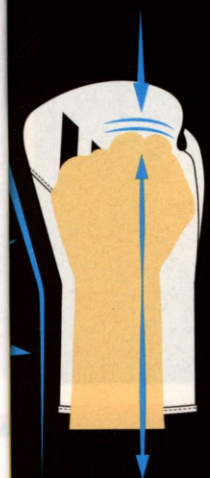

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OLEKSANDR USYK: MASTER OF THE UNEXPECTED

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WOJTEK URBANEK** • TEXT BY **THOMAS HAUSER**

Oleksandr Usyk refashioned the heavyweight landscape when he defeated Anthony Joshua to claim the IBF, WBA and WBO heavyweight belts. Suddenly, the planned megafight between Joshua and Tyson Fury was no more. The powers that be at Sky Sports (who had backed AJ throughout his ring career but seemed on the verge of losing him to DAZN) could have been forgiven for feeling a bit of schadenfreude.

Prior to fighting Joshua, Usyk acquitted himself well in the cruiserweight ranks, winning the World Boxing Super Series with victories over Marco Huck, Mairis Briedis and (impressively) Murat Gassiev to become the undisputed champion. But after moving up to heavyweight, he'd struggled against Chazz Witherspoon and Derek Chisora. There's a reason they have weight classes in boxing. The prevailing wisdom was that Joshua would be too big and strong for Oleksandr.

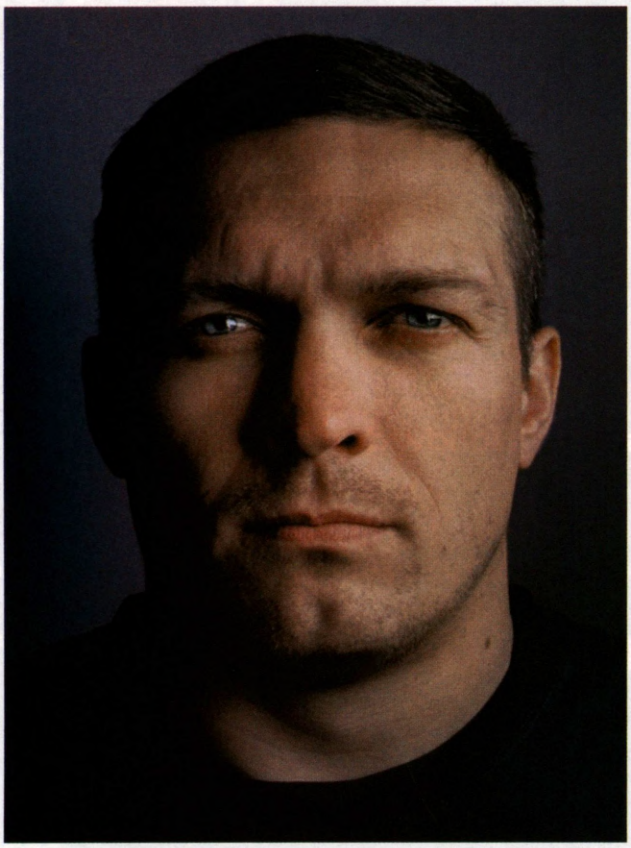
THE FACE OF BOXING

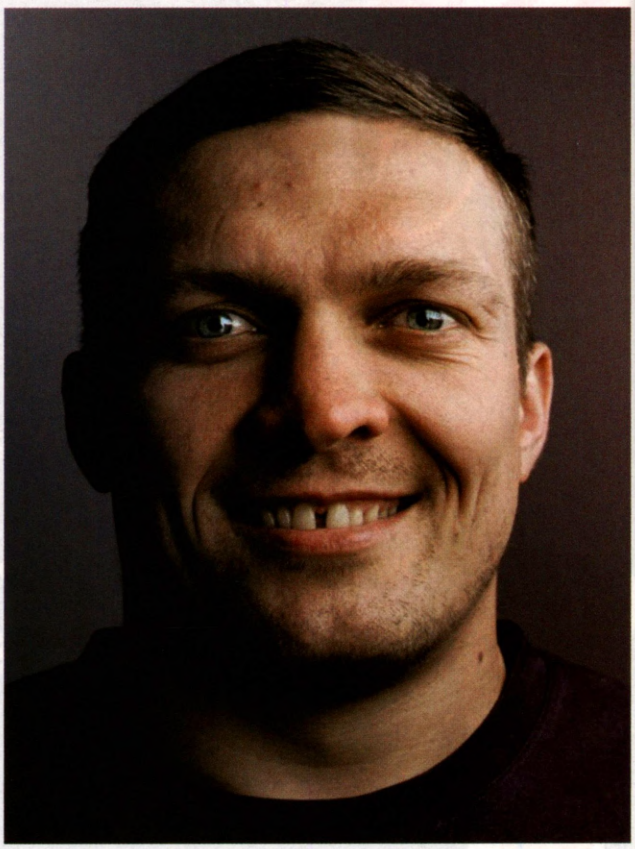
The prevailing wisdom was wrong. Against Joshua, Usyk controlled the action and befuddled the larger man en route to a 117-112, 116-112, 115-113 triumph.

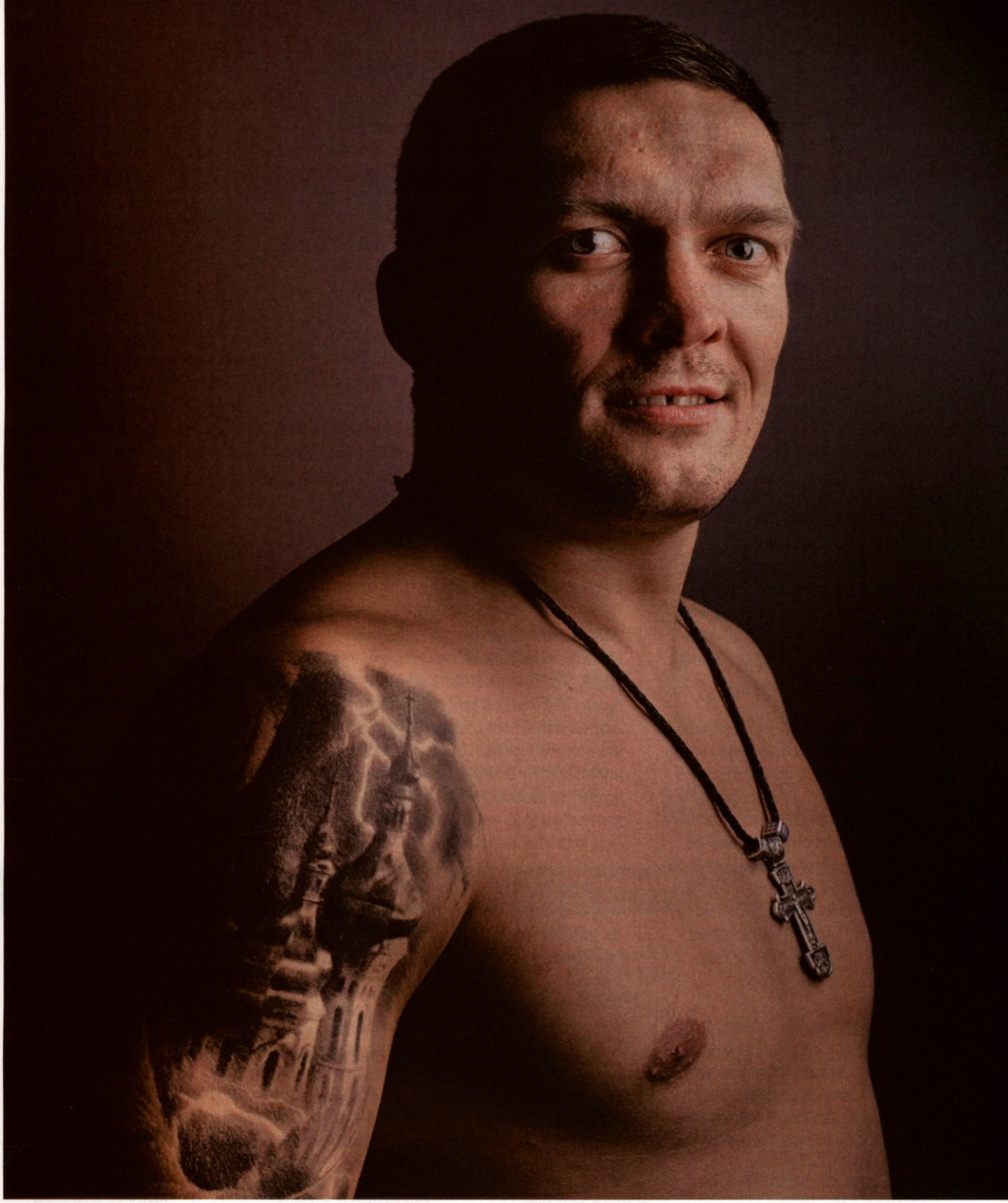
"This was the biggest fight in my career," Oleksandr said afterward. "But it wasn't the hardest. There were a couple of moments where Anthony pushed me hard, but nothing special."

When Wojtek Urbanek photographed Usyk, he had his own experience with the unexpected.

"It was at a boxing writers dinner," Urbanek remembers. "When he came for the photograph, he seemed like a nice guy, but there was a wild nature about him. He was unpredictable. He started with a joke and smiled. Then he sat down in front of the camera and started moving his head from side to side like a fighter slipping punches.







That's not how a photographer gets a good portrait. But he was showing me that he was in charge and dictating the mood completely. Then he gave me a crazy look. His eyes – the way he stared – his eyes were like from another planet. The closest comparison I can think of is that his eyes reminded me of The Joker from Batman. He was playing with me and kept presenting himself in different ways. His size made the experience even more intense. In a different setting, it might have been intimidating. Even now, I don't know what to think of him." RING

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RATINGS

SUMMARY ★ ANALYSIS

The Ring Ratings through fights of Dec. 11, 2021

RECENT FIGHT RESULTS AND CHANGES IN THE RING'S DIVISIONAL RANKINGS BY BRIAN HARTY

HEAVYWEIGHT: The Ratings Panel's opinion of Michael Hunter (No. 8 last month) soured after a draw with Jerry Forrest (unrated), so he was dumped and Cuba's Frank Sanchez entered at No. 10. Filip Hrgovic stayed at No. 9 after a third-round stoppage of Emir Ahmatovic (unrated).

CRUISERWEIGHT: Yuniel Dorticos shook off the cobwebs and held his No. 1 position with a stoppage of Missouri journeyman Jesse Bryan, who was overwhelmed by his taller foe in the second round.

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT: Badou Jack (No. 4) moved up to cruiserweight and knocked out Samuel Crossed, which created a vacancy at No. 10 for Joshua Buatsi, whose record now sits at 15-0 (13 KOs). A year after losing a split decision to Lyndon Arthur, Anthony Yarde got sweet revenge with a fourth-round knockout, which put him on the list at No. 9 and erased Arthur from the No. 7 spot. Dmitry Bivol then kept his position at No. 2 with a unanimous decision over fellow Russian Umar Salamov (unrated).

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHT: Christian Mbilli (No. 10 last month) was given a one-spot promotion after a near-shutout win over Ronald Ellis, but he ended up rising to No. 8 after Daniel Jacobs (No. 7) was removed for inactivity. The shift also created room for Zach Parker at No. 10.

MIDDLEWEIGHT: Demetrius Andrade scored a second-round stoppage against Jason Quigley (unrated) to hold his position at No. 3. Zhanibek Alimkhanuly remained at No. 7 after stopping Hassan N'Dam in the eighth round. There was a time when that win would've earned a promotion, but the 37-year-old N'Dam, while still "teak tough" as they say, is no longer the terminator who could get crushed six times in one fight and still keep coming. Carlos Adames (rated No. 9 at junior middleweight) then scored the upset and arrived at No. 8 with a majority decision over Sergiy Derevyanchenko, who boosted Alimkhanuly and a couple others by slipping from No. 4 to No. 9.

JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHT: Tim Tszyu kept the family name untarnished by dominating Takeshi Inoue (unrated) for 12 rounds, moving up from No. 6 to No. 5 as a result. Adames was removed, as was Sergio Garcia (No. 10), who took his first loss at the hands of Sebastian Fundora (No. 7 last month) via unanimous decision. Fundora rose to No. 6 and Nos. 9 and 10 went to Liam Smith and Israil Madrimov, respectively.

WELTERWEIGHT: Who knows when or if Terence Crawford (No. 2 last month) will ever get the Errol Spence fight, but at least he got some measure of satisfaction by jumping over his rival into the No. 1 position after doing something Spence couldn't do – stop Shawn Porter. (And we can finally put an end to all the letters we get asking how Crawford can be below Spence at 147 but above him in P4P!) Porter was his usual self, no reverse gear, but just like those before him, he found that he couldn't survive once "Bud" switched on. He went down twice in the 10th round – and you'll never see a guy more angry with himself for doing so – before his corner threw in the towel, and after the fight, the two-time titleholder from Ohio (rated No. 4 last month) announced the end of his remarkable career. His departure made room for undefeated Russian Radzhab Butaev at No. 10. A few weeks later, there were two more arrivals – Conor Benn at No. 9 and Cody Crowley at No. 10 – after the former knocked out Chris Algieri and the latter outpointed Kudratillo Abdukakhorov (No. 7 last month). Simultaneously, No. 6-rated Danny Garcia was removed for inactivity.

JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT: Gervonta Davis (No. 6) dropped down to lightweight, with the resulting vacancy at No. 10 going to Jose Pedraza (who always seems to be waiting outside the door).

LIGHTWEIGHT: Not to spoil anything you'll see on page 34, but George Kambosos Jr.'s split decision victory over Teofimo Lopez for all the belts was a bit of an upset. The Australian rose from No. 8 to the "C" position and Lopez dropped to No. 1. Full details to come. Devin Haney defended his WBC title and rose from No. 4 to No. 3 with an impressive unanimous decision over Joseph Diaz Jr., who stayed put at No. 6. Davis' return to 135 was marked by a possibly more-difficult-than-expected decision over Isaac Cruz, but it was enough to get him a spot at No. 4, which ejected No. 10-rated William Zepeda. No. 2-rated Vasiliy Lomachenko then had such an UN-difficult time beating Richard Commey (who fell from No. 5 to No. 9) that he resorted to some tasteless showboating that didn't impress the Ratings Panel much.

JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHT: Kenichi Ogawa swooped onto the list at No. 7 after winning the vacant IBF belt with a unanimous decision over Azinga Fuzile, who dropped out from No. 9. Shavkatdzhon Rakhimov's rank (No. 4) was unaffected by his second-round stoppage of Sardor Muzaffarov (unrated).

JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHT: No. 1-rated Murodjon Akhmadaliev defended his IBF and WBA belts with an unenthusiastic but thorough unanimous decision over late replacement Jose Velasquez (unrated). A week later, Stephen Fulton (No. 3 last month) jumped into the No. 1 spot with a majority

decision over Brandon Figueroa – a result that accurately portrayed the quality of a very entertaining competition – thus unifying the WBC and WBO titles. On the same card, Ra'eese Aleem (No. 7 last month) scored his own MD over Eduardo Baez (unrated) and rose a rank. Hiroaki Teshigawara (then No. 7) was knocked off the list by unrated Filipino Marlon Tapales, who came in at No. 9 after a second-round KO.

BANTAMWEIGHT: Gary Antonio Russell remained at No. 9 following a close decision over the unranked Alexandro Santiago. Nonito Donaire also held his position at No. 1 by way of a soul-sucking left hook to the liver of Reymart Gaballo (unrated) in Round 4.

JUNIOR BANTAMWEIGHT: The split draw between Donnie Nietes (No. 8) and Norbelto Jimenez (unrated) was no fun for anyone participating or watching, and it didn't affect the list.

FLYWEIGHT: The panel was divided on promoting him, but Artem Dalakian ultimately got the bump from No. 4 to No. 3 after defending his WBA title with a ninth-round TKO of the faded but still dangerous Luis Concepcion. Ricardo Sandoval rose from No. 6 to No. 5 with a seventh-round stoppage of Carlos Buitrago (unrated). Dalakian was then bumped back down to No. 4 when Sunny Edwards (No. 4 at the time) kept his IBF title with a wide decision over Jayson Mama and gained a notch, thus restoring last month's order.

POUND FOR POUND: There was no debate on the Ratings Panel about whether Crawford (No. 4 last month) should rise to No. 3 after the Porter win. There was a lengthy conversation, however, about how to fill the void at No. 10 after Lopez (No. 7 last month) was kicked out. The first candidate proposed was Tyson Fury, which touched a nerve with some panelists who questioned whether size-advantaged heavyweights can be compared to smaller fighters at all in an "all things equal" fantasy, with one member saying that the concept of pound-for-pound was specifically created to recognize smaller weight classes. Other candidates proposed were Artur Beterbiev, Gervonta Davis, Gennadiy Golovkin, Roman Gonzalez, Shakur Stevenson and even Kambosos, but none of them gained much traction as the alternative to Fury's inauguration, so the "results-oriented" opinions won and the heavyweight champion entered at No. 10. There was a half-hearted suggestion to lift Lomachenko after his victory over Commey, but nobody went for it.

P4P

1. **CANELO ALVAREZ**
   Mexico • 57-1-2 (39 KOs)
2. **OLEKSANDR USYK**
   Ukraine • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)
3. **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
   U.S. • 38-0-0 (29 KOs)
4. **NAOYA INOUE**
   Japan • 21-0-0 (18 KOs)
5. **JOSH TAYLOR**
   U.K. • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
6. **ERROL SPENCE JR.**
   U.S. • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)
7. **JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA**
   Mexico • 42-3-0 (28 KOs)
8. **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
   Ukraine • 16-2-0 (11 KOs)
9. **KAZUTO IOKA**
   Japan • 27-2-0 (15 KOs)
10. **TYSON FURY**
    U.K. • 31-0-1 (22 KOs)

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

- C **TYSON FURY** RING, WBC
  U.K. • 31-0-1 (22 KOs)
- 1 **OLEKSANDR USYK** IBF, WBA, WBO
  Ukraine • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)
- 2 **ANTHONY JOSHUA**
  U.K. • 24-2-0 (22 KOs)
- 3 **DEONTAY WILDER**
  U.S. • 42-2-1 (41 KOs)
- 4 **DILLIAN WHYTE**
  U.K. • 28-2-0 (19 KOs)
- 5 **JOSEPH PARKER**
  New Zealand • 29-2-0 (21 KOs)
- 6 **ANDY RUIZ JR.**
  U.S. • 34-2-0 (22 KOs)
- 7 **LUIS ORTIZ**
  Cuba • 32-2-0 (27 KOs)
- 8 **JOE JOYCE**
  U.K. • 13-0-0 (12 KOs)
- 9 **FILIP HRGOVIC**
  Croatia • 14-0-0 (12 KOs)
- 10 **FRANK SANCHEZ**
  Cuba • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 POUNDS

- C **MAIRIS BRIEDIS** RING, IBF
  Latvia • 28-1-0 (20 KOs)
- 1 **YUNIEL DORTICOS**
  Cuba • 25-2-0 (23 KOs)
- 2 **ILUNGA MAKABU** WBC
  Congo • 28-2-0 (25 KOs)
- 3 **LAWRENCE OKOLIE** WBO
  U.K. • 17-0-0 (14 KOs)
- 4 **THABISO MCHUNU**
  S. Africa • 23-5-0 (13 KOs)
- 5 **KEVIN LERENA**
  S. Africa • 26-1-0 (13 KOs)
- 6 **KRZYSZTOF GLOWACKI**
  Poland • 31-3-0 (19 KOs)
- 7 **ALEKSEI PAPIN**
  Russia • 13-1-0 (12 KOs)
- 8 **MICHAL CIESLAK**
  Poland • 21-1-0 (15 KOs)
- 9 **MATEUSZ MASTERNAK**
  Poland • 46-5-0 (31 KOs)
- 10 **RYAD MERHY**
  Belgium • 30-1-0 (25 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 POUNDS

- C **(VACANT)**
- 1 **ARTUR BETERBIEV** IBF, WBC
  Russia • 16-0-0 (16 KOs)
- 2 **DMITRY BIVOL** WBA
  Russia • 19-0-0 (11 KOs)
- 3 **JOE SMITH JR.**
  U.S. • 27-3-0 (21 KOs)
- 4 **ELEIDER ALVAREZ**
  Colombia • 25-2-0 (13 KOs)
- 5 **MARCUS BROWNE**
  U.S. • 24-1-0 (16 KOs)
- 6 **MAXIM VLASOV**
  Russia • 45-4-0 (26 KOs)
- 7 **GILBERTO RAMIREZ**
  Mexico • 42-0-0 (28 KOs)
- 8 **CALLUM SMITH**
  U.K. • 28-1-0 (20 KOs)
- 9 **ANTHONY YARDE**
  U.K. • 22-2-0 (21 KOs)
- 10 **JOSHUA BUATSI**
  U.K. • 15-0-0 (13 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

- C **CANELO ALVAREZ** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
  Mexico • 57-1-2 (39 KOs)
- 1 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ**
  U.S. • 25-0-0 (22 KOs)
- 2 **CALEB PLANT**
  U.S. • 21-1-0 (12 KOs)
- 3 **BILLY JOE SAUNDERS**
  U.K. • 30-1-0 (14 KOs)
- 4 **ANTHONY DIRRELL**
  U.S. • 34-2-2 (25 KOs)
- 5 **JOHN RYDER**
  U.K. • 30-5-0 (17 KOs)
- 6 **DAVID LEMIEUX**
  Canada • 43-4-0 (36 KOs)
- 7 **FEDOR CHUDINOV**
  Russia • 25-2-1 (17 KOs)
- 8 **CHRISTIAN MBILLI**
  France • 20-0-0 (18 KOs)
- 9 **CARLOS GONGORA**
  Ecuador • 20-0-0 (15 KOs)
- 10 **ZACH PARKER**
  U.K. • 22-0-0 (16 KOs)

RATINGS

Through fights of Dec. 11, 2021

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**
1	**GENNADIY GOLOVKIN** IBF Kazakhstan • 41-1-1 (36 KOs)
2	**JERMALL CHARLO** WBC U.S. • 32-0-0 (22 KOs)
3	**DEMETRIUS ANDRADE** WBO U.S. • 31-0-0 (19 KOs)
4	**JAIME MUNGUIA** Mexico • 38-0-0 (30 KOs)
5	**RYOTA MURATA** WBA Japan • 16-2-0 (13 KOs)
6	**ZHANIBEK ALIMKHANULY** Kazakhstan • 11-0-0 (7 KOs)
7	**CHRIS EUBANK JR.** U.K. • 31-2-0 (23 KOs)
8	**CARLOS ADAMES** Dom. Rep. • 21-1-0 (16 KOs)
9	**SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO** Ukraine • 13-4-0 (10 KOs)
10	**LIAM WILLIAMS** U.K. • 23-3-1 (18 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C	**JERMELL CHARLO** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC U.S. • 34-1-1 (18 KOs)
1	**BRIAN CASTANO** WBO Argentina • 17-0-2 (12 KOs)
2	**JARRETT HURD** U.S. • 24-2-0 (16 KOs)
3	**ERISLANDY LARA** Cuba • 28-3-3 (16 KOs)
4	**ERICKSON LUBIN** U.S. • 24-1-0 (17 KOs)
5	**TIM TSZYU** Australia • 20-0-0 (15 KOs)
6	**SEBASTIAN FUNDORA** U.S. • 18-0-1 (12 KOs)
7	**TONY HARRISON** U.S. • 28-3-1 (21 KOs)
8	**MAGOMED KURBANOV** Russia • 22-0-0 (13 KOs)
9	**LIAM SMITH** U.K. • 30-3-1 (17 KOs)
10	**ISRAIL MADRIMOV** Uzbekistan • 7-0-0 (5 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**
1	**TERENCE CRAWFORD** WBO U.S. • 38-0-0 (29 KOs)
2	**ERROL SPENCE JR.** IBF, WBC U.S. • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)
3	**YORDENIS UGAS** WBA Cuba • 27-4-0 (12 KOs)
4	**JARON ENNIS** U.S. • 28-0-0 (26 KOs)
5	**VERGIL ORTIZ JR.** U.S. • 18-0-0 (18 KOs)
6	**EIMANTAS STANIONIS** Lithuania • 13-0-0 (9 KOs)
7	**DAVID AVANESYAN** Russia • 28-3-1 (16 KOs)
8	**RADZHAB BUTAEV** Russia • 14-0-0 (11 KOs)
9	**CONOR BENN** U.K. • 20-0-0 (13 KOs)
10	**CODY CROWLEY** Canada • 20-0-0 (9 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C	**JOSH TAYLOR** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO U.K. • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
1	**REGIS PROGRAIS** U.S. • 26-1-0 (22 KOs)
2	**JOSE RAMIREZ** U.S. • 26-1-0 (17 KOs)
3	**JOSE ZEPEDA** U.S. • 35-2-0 (27 KOs)
4	**VIKTOR POSTOL** Ukraine • 31-3-0 (12 KOs)
5	**ARNOLD BARBOZA** U.S. • 26-0-0 (10 KOs)
6	**SUBRIEL MATIAS** Puerto Rico • 17-1-0 (17 KOs)
7	**MARIO BARRIOS** U.S. • 26-1-0 (17 KOs)
8	**SHOHJAHON ERGASHEV** Uzbekistan • 21-0-0 (19 KOs)
9	**BATYR AKHMEDOV** Russia • 9-1-0 (8 KOs)
10	**JOSE PEDRAZA** Puerto Rico • 29-3-0 (14 KOs)

Unbeaten Croatian Filip Hrgovic now sits at No. 9 in the heavyweight ratings after stopping Emir Ahmatovic in three rounds.

Demetrius Andrade's second-round stoppage of Jason Quigley was an impressive result, but not enough to jump over Jermell Charlo in the ratings.

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C	**GEORGE KAMBOSOS JR.** RING, IBF, WBA, WBO Australia • 20-0-0 (10 KOs)
1	**TEOFIMO LOPEZ** U.S. • 16-1-0 (12 KOs)
2	**VASILIY LOMACHENKO** Ukraine • 16-2-0 (11 KOs)
3	**DEVIN HANEY** WBC U.S. • 27-0-0 (15 KOs)
4	**GERVONTA DAVIS** U.S. • 26-0-0 (24 KOs)
5	**RYAN GARCIA** U.S. • 21-0-0 (18 KOs)
6	**ISAAC CRUZ** Mexico • 22-2-1 (15 KOs)
7	**JOSEPH DIAZ JR.** U.S. • 32-2-1 (15 KOs)
8	**JORGE LINARES** Venezuela • 47-6-0 (29 KOs)
9	**RICHARD COMMEY** Ghana • 30-4-0 (27 KOs)
10	**JAVIER FORTUNA** Dom. Rep. • 36-3-1 (25 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**
1	**SHAKUR STEVENSON** WBO U.S. • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)
2	**MIGUEL BERCHELT** Mexico • 38-2-0 (34 KOs)
3	**JAMEL HERRING** U.S. • 23-3-0 (11 KOs)
4	**SHAVKATDZHON RAKHIMOV** Russia • 16-0-1 (13 KOs)
5	**CHRIS COLBERT** U.S. • 16-0-0 (6 KOs)
6	**ROGER GUTIERREZ** Venezuela • 26-3-1 (20 KOs)
7	**KENICHI OGAWA** IBF Japan • 26-1-1 (18 KOs)
8	**O'SHAQUIE FOSTER** U.S. • 18-2-0 (11 KOs)
9	**XAVIER MARTINEZ** U.S. • 17-0-0 (11 KOs)
10	**ROBSON CONCEICAO** Brazil • 16-1-0 (8 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**
1	**EMANUEL NAVARRETE** WBO Mexico • 35-1-0 (29 KOs)
2	**MAURICIO LARA** Mexico • 23-2-1 (16 KOs)
3	**JOSH WARRINGTON** U.K. • 30-1-1 (7 KOs)
4	**MARK MAGSAYO** Phil. • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)
5	**KIKO MARTINEZ** IBF Spain • 43-10-2 (30 KOs)
6	**LEIGH WOOD** U.K. • 25-2-0 (15 KOs)
7	**KID GALAHAD** U.K. • 28-2-0 (17 KOs)
8	**TUGSTSOGT NYAMBAYAR** Mongolia • 12-2-0 (9 KOs)
9	**XU CAN** China • 18-3-0 (3 KOs)
10	**JOET GONZALEZ** U.S. • 24-2-0 (14 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**
1	**STEPHEN FULTON** WBC, WBO U.S. • 20-0-0 (8 KOs)
2	**MURODJON AKHMADALIEV** IBF, WBA Uzbekistan • 10-0-0 (7 KOs)
3	**DANIEL ROMAN** U.S. • 29-3-1 (10 KOs)
4	**BRANDON FIGUEROA** U.S. • 22-1-1 (17 KOs)
5	**ANGELO LEO** U.S. • 21-1-0 (9 KOs)
6	**RA'EESE ALEEM** U.S. • 19-0-0 (12 KOs)
7	**AZAT HOVHANNISYAN** Armenia • 20-3-0 (16 KOs)
8	**RONNY RIOS** U.S. • 33-3-0 (16 KOs)
9	**MARLON TAPALES** Phil. • 35-3-0 (18 KOs)
10	**RYOSUKE IWASA** Japan • 27-4-0 (17 KOs)

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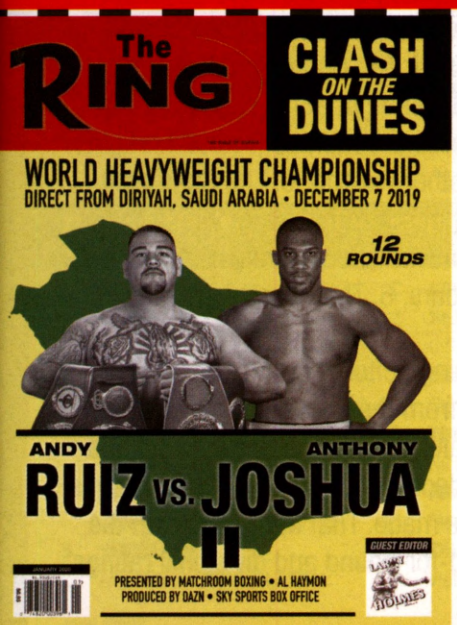

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WOMEN'S RATINGS

Through fights of Dec. 11, 2021

POUND FOR POUND

1 **KATIE TAYLOR**
Ireland • 20-0-0 (6 KOs)

2 **CLARESSA SHIELDS**
U.S. • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)

3 **AMANDA SERRANO**
Puerto Rico • 41-1-1 (30 KOs)

4 **JESSICA MCCASKILL**
U.S. • 11-2-0 (4 KOs)

5 **DELFINE PERSOON**
Belgium • 46-3-0 (19 KOs)

6 **CHANTELLE CAMERON**
U.K. • 15-0-0 (8 KOs)

7 **MIKAELA MAYER**
U.S. • 16-0-0 (5 KOs)

8 **CECILIA BRAEKHUS**
Norway • 36-2-0 (9 KOs)

9 **SENIESA ESTRADA**
U.S. • 21-0-0 (8 KOs)

10 **SAVANNAH MARSHALL**
U.K. • 11-0-0 (9 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **ELIN CEDERROOS** IBF, WBA
Sweden • 8-0-0 (4 KOs)
2 **FRANCHON CREWS-DEZURN** WBC, WBO
U.S. • 7-1-0 (2 KOs)
3 **EMA KOZIN**
Slovenia • 21-0-1 (11 KOs)
4 **CHRISTINA HAMMER**
Germany • 27-1-0 (13 KOs)
5 **SHADASIA GREEN**
U.S. • 8-0-0 (7 KOs)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C **CLARESSA SHIELDS** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
U.S. • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)
1 **SAVANNAH MARSHALL**
U.K. • 11-0-0 (9 KOs)
2 **CHRISTINA HAMMER**
Germany • 27-1-0 (13 KOs)
3 **EMA KOZIN**
Slovenia • 21-0-1 (11 KOs)
4 **FEMKE HERMANS**
Belgium • 12-3-0 (5 KOs)
5 **RAQUEL MILLER**
U.S. • 11-0-0 (4 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C **CLARESSA SHIELDS** RING, WBO
U.S. • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)
1 **MARIE EVE DICAIRE**
Canada • 17-1-0 (0 KOs)
2 **PATRICIA BERGHULT** WBC
Sweden • 15-0-0 (3 KOs)
3 **HANNAH RANKIN** WBA
U.K. • 11-5-0 (2 KOs)
4 **CHRIS NAMUS**
Uruguay • 25-6-0 (8 KOs)
5 **CYNTHIA LOZANO**
Mexico • 9-0-0 (7 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C **JESSICA MCCASKILL** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
U.S. • 11-2-0 (4 KOs)
1 **CECILIA BRAEKHUS**
Norway • 36-2-0 (9 KOs)
2 **LAYLA MCCARTER**
U.S. • 44-13-5 (11 KOs)
3 **VICTORIA BUSTOS**
Argentina • 22-6-0 (0 KOs)
4 **LOLITA MUZEYA**
Zambia • 16-1-0 (8 KOs)
5 **EWA PIATKOWSKA**
Poland • 16-1-0 (4 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C **CHANTELLE CAMERON** RING, IBF, WBC
U.K. • 15-0-0 (8 KOs)
1 **ERICA FARIAS**
Argentina • 26-5-0 (10 KOs)
2 **KALI REIS** WBA, WBO
U.S. • 19-7-1 (5 KOs)
3 **MARY MCGEE**
U.S. • 27-4-0 (15 KOs)
4 **ANAHI SANCHEZ**
Argentina • 20-5-0 (12 KOs)
5 **JESSICA CAMARA**
Canada • 8-3-0 (0 KOs)

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C **KATIE TAYLOR** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
Ireland • 20-0-0 (6 KOs)
1 **DELFINE PERSOON**
Belgium • 46-3-0 (19 KOs)
2 **ESTELLE MOSSELY**
Belgium • 9-0-0 (1 KOs)
3 **MIRIAM GUTIERREZ**
Spain • 14-1-0 (5 KOs)
4 **NATASHA JONAS**
U.K. • 10-2-1 (7 KOs)
5 **JENNIFER HAN**
U.S. • 18-4-1 (1 KO)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C **MIKAELA MAYER** RING, IBF, WBO
U.S. • 16-0-0 (5 KOs)
1 **DELFINE PERSOON**
Belgium • 46-3-0 (19 KOs)
2 **ALYCIA BAUMGARDNER** WBC
U.S. • 11-1-0 (7 KOs)
3 **MAIVA HAMADOUCHE**
France • 22-2-0 (18 KOs)
4 **HYUN MI CHOI** WBA
South Korea • 19-0-1 (5 KOs)
5 **TERRI HARPER**
U.K. • 11-1-1 (6 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **AMANDA SERRANO** WBC, WBO
Puerto Rico • 41-1-1 (30 KOs)
2 **ERIKA CRUZ HERNANDEZ** WBA
Mexico • 14-1-0 (3 KOs)
3 **SARAH MAHFOUD**
Denmark • 10-0-0 (3 KOs)
4 **JELENA MRDJENOVICH**
Canada • 41-11-2 (19 KOs)
5 **ELINA TISSEN**
Germany • 25-2-0 (6 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **JACKIE NAVA**
Mexico • 39-4-4 (16 KOs)
2 **DINA THORSLUND** WBO
Denmark • 17-0-0 (7 KOs)
3 **SEGOLENE LEFEBVRE**
France • 15-0-0 (1 KOs)
4 **YAMILETH MERCADO** WBC
Mexico • 18-3-0 (5 KOs)
5 **MARIANA JUAREZ**
Mexico • 55-11-4 (19 KOs)

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **DINA THORSLUND** WBO
Denmark • 17-0-0 (7 KOs)
2 **YULIHAN LUNA AVILA** WBC
Mexico • 22-3-1 (4 KOs)
3 **MARIANA JUAREZ**
Mexico • 55-11-4 (19 KOs)
4 **ZULINA MUNOZ**
Mexico • 53-4-2 (30 KOs)
5 **MARIA CECILIA ROMAN** IBF
Argentina • 16-5-1 (0 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **LOURDES JUAREZ** WBC
Mexico • 33-2-0 (4 KOs)
2 **GUADALUPE MARTINEZ**
Mexico • 20-10-0 (6 KOs)
3 **YESSICA CHAVEZ**
Mexico • 32-5-3 (4 KOs)
4 **DIANA FERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 24-4-1 (4 KOs)
5 **ADELAIDA RUIZ**
U.S. • 10-0-1 (5 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **NAOKO FUJIOKA** WBA
Japan • 19-2-1 (7 KOs)
2 **ARELY MUCINO** WBO
Mexico • 30-3-2 (10 KOs)
3 **MARLEN ESPARZA**
U.S. • 10-1-0 (1 KOs) WBC
4 **IBETH ZAMORA**
Mexico • 32-7-0 (12 KOs)
5 **JESSICA NERY PLATA**
Mexico • 27-2-0 (3 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **SENIESA ESTRADA** WBO
U.S. • 21-0-0 (8 KOs)
2 **EVELYN BERMUDEZ** IBF
Argentina • 14-0-1 (4 KOs)
3 **KIM CLAVEL**
Canada • 14-0-0 (2 KOs)
4 **TSUNAMI TENKAI**
Japan • 28-13-1 (16 KOs)
5 **YESICA BOPP**
Argentina • 37-2-0 (17 KOs)

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **SENIESA ESTRADA** WBA
U.S. • 21-0-0 (8 KOs)
2 **CHRISTINA RUPPRECHT** WBC
Germany • 11-0-1 (3 KOs)
3 **YOKASTA VALLE** IBF
Nicaragua • 22-2-0 (9 KOs)
4 **ANABEL ORTIZ**
Mexico • 31-4-0 (4 KOs)
5 **THI THU NHI NGUYEN** WBO
Vietnam • 5-0-0 (1 KO)

ATOMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 102 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **MONSERRAT ALARCON** WBA
Mexico • 17-4-2 (0 KOs)
2 **FABIANA BYTYQI** WBC
Czech Rep. • 18-0-1 (5 KOs)
3 **MIKA IWAKAWA** WBO
Japan • 10-5-1 (3 KOs)
4 **ERI MATSUDA**
Japan • 4-0-1 (1 KO)
5 **YENIFER LEON**
Venezuela • 13-4-0 (9 KOs)

RATINGS

Through fights of Dec. 11, 2021

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

- **C** **NAOYA INOUE** RING, IBF, WBA
  Japan • 21-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **1** **NONITO DONAIRE** WBC
  Phil. • 42-6-0 (28 KOs)
- **2** **JOHN RIEL CASIMERO** WBO
  Phil. • 31-4-0 (21 KOs)
- **3** **EMMANUEL RODRIGUEZ**
  Puerto Rico • 19-2-0 (12 KOs)
- **4** **NORDINE OUBAALI**
  France • 17-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **5** **JASON MOLONEY**
  Australia • 22-2-0 (18 KOs)
- **6** **TAKUMA INOUE**
  Japan • 15-1-0 (3 KOs)
- **7** **GUILLERMO RIGONDEAUX**
  Cuba • 20-2-0 (13 KOs)
- **8** **RAU'SHEE WARREN**
  U.S. • 19-3-0 (5 KOs)
- **9** **GARY ANTONIO RUSSELL**
  U.S. • 19-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **10** **LEE MCGREGOR**
  U.K. • 11-0-0 (9 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

- **C** **JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA** RING,WBA,WBC
  Mexico • 42-3-0 (28 KOs)
- **1** **SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI**
  Thailand • 50-5-1 (43 KOs)
- **2** **ROMAN GONZALEZ**
  Nicaragua • 50-3-0 (41 KOs)
- **3** **KAZUTO IOKA** WBO
  Japan • 27-2-0 (15 KOs)
- **4** **JERWIN ANCAJAS** IBF
  Phil. • 33-1-2 (22 KOs)
- **5** **JOSHUA FRANCO**
  U.S. • 18-1-2 (8 KOs)
- **6** **CARLOS CUADRAS**
  Mexico • 39-4-1 (27 KOs)
- **7** **FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ JR.**
  Mexico • 34-5-1 (24 KOs)
- **8** **DONNIE NIETES**
  Phil. • 43-1-6 (23 KOs)
- **9** **ANDREW MOLONEY**
  Australia • 21-2-0 (14 KOs)
- **10** **PEDRO GUEVARA**
  Mexico • 38-3-1 (22 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **JULIO CESAR MARTINEZ** WBC
  Mexico • 18-1-0 (14 KOs)
- **2** **JUNTO NAKATANI** WBO
  Japan • 22-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **3** **SUNNY EDWARDS** IBF
  U.K. • 17-0-0 (4 KOs)
- **4** **ARTEM DALAKIAN** WBA
  Ukraine • 21-0-0 (15 KOs)
- **5** **RICARDO SANDOVAL**
  U.S. • 20-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **6** **MORUTI MTHALANE**
  S. Africa • 39-3-0 (26 KOs)
- **7** **CRISTOFER ROSALES**
  Nicaragua • 31-5-0 (21 KOs)
- **8** **MCWILLIAMS ARROYO**
  Puerto Rico • 21-4-0 (16 KOs)
- **9** **JACKSON CHAUKE**
  S. Africa • 20-1-1 (14 KOs)
- **10** **RYOTA YAMAUCHI**
  Japan • 8-1-0 (7 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

- **C** **HIROTO KYOGUCHI** RING, WBA
  Japan • 15-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **1** **FELIX ALVARADO** IBF
  Nicaragua • 37-2-0 (32 KOs)
- **2** **MASAMICHI YABUKI** WBC
  Japan • 13-3-0 (12 KOs)
- **3** **KENSHIRO TERAJI**
  Japan • 18-1-0 (10 KOs)
- **4** **JONATHAN GONZALEZ** WBO
  Puerto Rico • 25-3-1 (14 KOs)
- **5** **JESSE RODRIGUEZ**
  U.S. • 14-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **6** **ELWIN SOTO**
  Mexico • 19-2-0 (13 KOs)
- **7** **HEKKIE BUDLER**
  S. Africa • 33-4-0 (10 KOs)
- **8** **AGUSTIN GAUTO**
  Argentina • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **9** **ESTEBAN BERMUDEZ**
  Mexico • 14-3-2 (10 KOs)
- **10** **DANIEL MATELLON**
  Cuba • 12-0-2 (6 KOs)

Terence Crawford was so good in his 10th-round stoppage of two-time welterweight titleholder Shawn Porter that he displaced Errol Spence as the top fighter at 147 pounds.

Conor Benn debuted at welterweight in the No. 9 position following a brutal fourth-round knockout of Chris Algieri.

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART** WBA
  Thailand • 22-0-0 (8 KOs)
- **2** **PETCHMANEE CP FRESHMART** WBC
  Thailand • 37-1-0 (23 KOs)
- **3** **WANHENG MENAYOTHIN**
  Thailand • 55-1-0 (19 KOs)
- **4** **WILFREDO MENDEZ** WBO
  Puerto Rico • 16-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **5** **VIC SALUDAR**
  Phil. • 21-4-0 (11 KOs)
- **6** **RENE MARK CUARTO** IBF
  Phil. • 19-2-2 (11 KOs)
- **7** **PEDRO TADURAN**
  Phil. • 14-3-1 (11 KOs)
- **8** **MASATAKA TANIGUCHI**
  Japan • 14-3-0 (9 KOs)
- **9** **GINJIRO SHIGEOKA**
  Japan • 6-0-0 (5 KOs)
- **10** **YUDAI SHIGEOKA**
  Japan • 4-0-0 (2 KOs)

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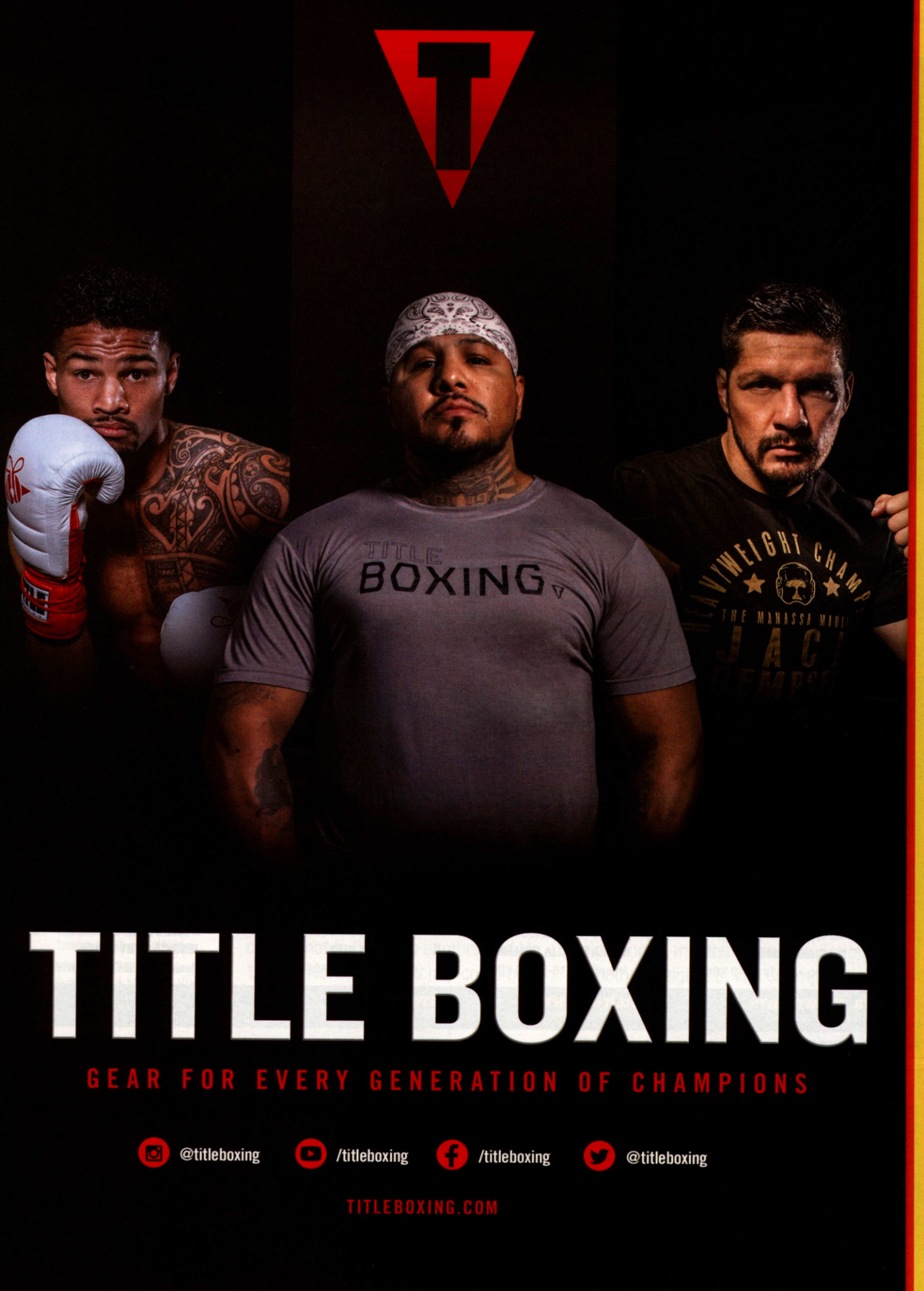
Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose his belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which he is champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at his championship weight for 18 months (even if he fights at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.



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THE 93RD ANNUAL RING AWARDS
THE
BEST
OF
2021

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR

BY DAN RAFAEL

CANELO ALVAREZ

After Canelo Alvarez drove Caleb Plant to the canvas for the second time in the 11th round with three brutal right hands to the head, and referee Russell Mora immediately waved off the fight, the pound-for-pound king raced across the ring and climbed the ropes in victory.

At ringside inside the sold-out MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas on the electric night of November 6, Showtime blow-by-blow man Mauro Ranallo captured the moment with his call.

"The coronation is complete," Ranallo roared. "All hail King Canelo! Viva Mexico's first undisputed champion!"

Indeed, not only was Alvarez's coronation complete as the first undisputed super middleweight world champion, and the first Mexican boxer to become an undisputed champion in any weight division in the three- or four-belt era, he also sealed the deal as the clear choice for The Ring's 2021 Fighter of the Year, winning it for the second time.

"For me it's an honor. Like I always say, I love boxing. I do this because I love boxing, and whatever is coming is an honor for me," Alvarez told The Ring. "It's a bonus for me because I love this sport. I respect this sport and I always try to do my best in boxing.

"I feel great. I feel blessed, because at the end of the day, I want to make history in my career. And so I feel blessed. I feel so good about this. This is the second, but I hope there are many more to come."

Alvarez also won the award in 2019, a year in which he outpointed Daniel Jacobs to unify three middleweight world titles and then spectacularly knocked out Sergey Kovalev in the 11th round when he jumped up two divisions to win a light heavyweight belt.

Winning the prestigious award again will go a long way in leaving a mark on boxing history, something the 31-year-old Alvarez (57-1-2, 39 KOs) talks about on a regular basis, even while saying such accolades are not something he thinks about.

"Never," Alvarez said. "I just focus on my fights and winning, and winning, and accomplishing the goals we have in front of us."

While his path to the 2019 award came by beating significant opponents for titles in two weight classes, his goal in 2021 was different.

It was a year in which Alvarez had his mind set on achieving just one thing in one division – becoming the first undisputed champion in the 37-year history of a 168-pound weight class that many greats have called home but who never could be called undisputed, including Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns, Roy Jones Jr., James Toney, Joe Calzaghe, Nigel Benn, Chris Eubank, Andre Ward, Carl Froch, Mikkel Kessler and others.

Alvarez's quest actually began in the

Canelo finishes Caleb Plant and makes history by becoming boxing's first undisputed champ at 168 pounds.

AL BELLO

UNDISPUTED
SUPER MIDDLE WEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD
WORLD CHAMPION

waning days of 2020, when he easily outpointed Callum Smith to take the Englishman's Ring championship and WBA belt as well as the vacant WBC title. He was now a four-weight world champion and this victory set the tone for his busy and historic 2021.

Alvarez would fight four times in 11 months, including the Smith and Plant fights, an unheard-of level of activity for an elite fighter in this day and age. He began his 2021 campaign with the expected destruction of WBC mandatory challenger Avni Yildirim, who had stepped aside to allow Alvarez to face Smith for the vacant WBC title with the contractual promise that the winner would face him next.

Living up to his word, Alvarez met Yildirim on February 27 at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida, and crushed him in three lopsided rounds. It wasn't the fight Alvarez wanted, but he had promised to do it. Besides, when boxing's P4P king and biggest attraction fights four times in 11 months, most would agree he's entitled to a soft touch in there.

It was Canelo's next two bouts that really mattered when it came to Fighter of the Year consideration.

On May 8, Alvarez squared off with England's Billy Joe Saunders, the unbeaten WBO titleholder, in the second outing of Canelo's two-fight deal with promoter Eddie Hearn of Matchroom Boxing and DAZN.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, they met at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, where capacity limits had largely been lifted, and drew a United States indoor boxing record crowd of 73,126 on Cinco de Mayo weekend. The pro-Canelo crowd smashed the previous record of 63,352 for the heavyweight championship rematch between Muhammad Ali and Leon Spinks at the Superdome in New Orleans on September 15, 1978. It was just another nugget of history that did not go unnoticed by Alvarez.

If you want a super middleweight title, King Canelo is the man you'll have to go through.

"I think Caleb Plant was a bigger fight because there was only one more belt left, so the magnitude of the fight was bigger, but the fight I enjoyed a lot was Billy Joe Saunders, because he talked a lot of shit and we had 73,000 people in the arena," Alvarez said.

"I loved [setting the attendance record], because for me, I'm gonna be in the history books of boxing for that too. So for me it's huge, and I hope I can break that record soon."

As for the fight, Saunders talked a big game, complained there was no British judge on the panel and even threatened to pull out during fight week because the ring (which was regulation size) wasn't as large as he wanted.

Ultimately, Alvarez didn't care who the judges were or what the size of the ring was, and he gave in to Saunders' ring request. Most thought Saunders' technical southpaw style might trouble Alvarez for a few rounds, especially with a larger ring in which to roam. But it hardly did, and the roomier ring couldn't save Saunders from Alvarez's wrath.

Although Saunders had mild success boxing Alvarez in the middle rounds, he proved no match for the Mexican star. By the end of the eighth round, during which Alvarez punished him with right hands to the face, Saunders' right eye was swollen closed and trainer Mark Tibbs eventually motioned to referee Mark Calo-oy to stop the fight.

Alvarez, who had predicted he would break Saunders down and stop him between the eighth and 10th rounds, said he felt a powerful right uppercut dig into Saunders' face. As it turned out, Alvarez had broken Saunders' cheekbone and orbital bone, injuries that required surgery.

With the WBA, WBC and WBO belts in his possession along with The Ring title, it left just one piece of hardware remaining for Alvarez to collect – Plant's IBF title.

Alvarez had purposely done a short-term deal with Hearn and DAZN in order to make sure no obstacles stood in the way of pursuing the fights he wanted. So, as a promotional and broadcast free agent, he commenced talks with Premier Boxing Champions' Al Haymon, who represented Plant, for a fight that would ultimately land on Showtime PPV. The hardball negotiations led to the event being set for November rather than the Mexican Independence Day weekend in September when Alvarez wanted to fight, but at least he had the matchup he wanted.

Although Plant fought well and won some rounds, he was trailing on all three scorecards going into the 11th round and was no match for Alvarez's diverse and punishing attack, which culminated with Alvarez scoring two knockdowns, getting the stoppage and sending Plant to the hospital.

Alvarez had reached his historic undisputed goal in just 11 months to become only the sixth man to fully unify a division in the four-belt era, joining middleweight Bernard Hopkins (2004), middleweight Jermain Taylor (2005), junior welterweight Terence Crawford (2017), cruiserweight Oleksandr Usyk (2018) and junior welterweight Josh Taylor (2021).

"We accomplished one of the best things in boxing, being undisputed," said Alvarez. "Outside the ring and inside the ring, too, it's the best year for me. I got married with my wife [Fernanda]. I'm so happy. I accomplished and made history as an undisputed champion. So for me it's maybe my best year in boxing." ★

RUNNERS UP

TYSON FURY

OLEKSANDR USYK

JOSH TAYLOR

TERENCE CRAWFORD

TYSON FURY KO 11 DEONTAY WILDER

BY TOM GRAY

"I'm running out of things to win," laughed a jubilant Tyson Fury when informed that he'd picked up two awards for 2021: Fight of the Year and Round of the Year.

"I'm absolutely ecstatic and overwhelmed to be recognized by Ring Magazine yet again. That's more awards to add to the collection and more plaques to put on the wall. I'm absolutely delighted, and I'd like to give a big shout out to Deontay Wilder, because I needed a dance partner in order to win this award."

Fury-Wilder 3 is Fight of the Year? Who would have thought it?

The bout was almost two years in the making, but by the time the fighters entered the ring at the T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas on October 9, many fans and experts felt that this trilogy match was just getting in the way.

The vast majority of the boxing world had their collective fingers and toes crossed for the long-awaited all-British collision between Fury and Anthony Joshua, which would finally consolidate all the pieces of the heavyweight puzzle. It was just a matter of time. Saudi Arabia would be the locale. August 14 would be the date. Boxing would have its first undisputed heavyweight champion since Lennox Lewis claimed that distinction by defeating Evander Holyfield in November 1999.

But nothing is *ever* guaranteed in this sport.

One very large banana peel, delivered with the speed and suddenness of a Wilder right-hand knockout shot, floored all concerned. A court arbitrator ruled that "The

ERIC W. HASSO

Fury went down twice in Fight 3, but Wilder stayed down.

Wilder remains the most dangerous puncher in world boxing.

Bronze Bomber" was legally entitled to a third fight with "The Gypsy King" and Team Fury had no option but to get it made. Yes, in the strike of a judge's gavel, the multimillion dollar Fury-Joshua matchup that appeared destined for the Middle East was transformed into a pile of tumbleweeds in the Arabian Desert.

And the drama didn't stop there.

Fury tested positive for COVID-19 – which sank the original July 24 date for Fury-Wilder 3 – and the bout was pushed back two-and-a-half months. All this waiting around so that Fury could prove (again) that he was a better fighter than Wilder. The Englishman had come out on the wrong end of a split decision draw in December 2018 and smashed Wilder to pieces en route to a seventh-round stoppage in February 2020. Wasn't that enough? The heavyweight division was in a state of disarray, and there was yet another direct hit for those who remained hopeful of a Fury-Joshua clash when Oleksandr Usyk wrenched the IBF, WBA and WBO titles from "AJ" in September. However, the unbeaten Usyk had performed brilliantly to claim a 12-round unanimous decision and his arrival among the heavyweight elite was a welcome one. Could Fury and Wilder give the glamour division another shot in the arm in their third encounter?

Could they ever.

Classic heavyweight championship trilogies are sacred among fight fans

and historians. Jersey Joe Walcott and Ezzard Charles duked it out four times, but their third encounter (won by Walcott KO 7) includes one of the most devastating knockouts in the division's rich history, and the bout was also voted Fight of the Year for 1951. The criminally overlooked Floyd Patterson and right-hand power puncher Ingemar Johannson shared three short and explosive meetings in as many years, and part two (won by Patterson KO 5) took the Fight of the Year award in 1960. Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier reign supreme with regard to heavyweight trilogies, having produced arguably the greatest rivalry in *all* of sports. "The Fight of the Century" and "The Thrilla in Manila," parts one and three, scooped Fight of the Year honors for 1971 and 1975 respectively. And while Evander Holyfield and Riddick Bowe were on far friendlier terms than Ali and Frazier, that didn't stop them from pulverizing each other in their epic three-fight series, with the first encounter (won by Bowe UD 12) being named Fight of the Year for 1992.

Fury-Wilder 3 borrowed heavily from all of the above. As with Patterson-Johannson 3, both men were on the floor. Just like Holyfield-Bowe 1, Wilder, the smaller man, struggled to overcome the size and skill of a much larger opponent but covered himself in glory trying. As with Frazier in his hellacious war with Ali in Manila, Wilder was willing to put his life on the line even when victory appeared to be impossible. And like Charles-Walcott 3, we had a clean and decisive knockout finish.

"It was a great fight, but not so great for me and Deontay, because fights like that knock years off your life," said Fury, who retained the Ring and WBC titles. "But it was an epic battle and a great trilogy. It was definitely all worth it. There was a lot of talk that it was one of the best heavyweight fights in recent years, and it was a great thing to be a part of."

After a slow start, Fury took command in Round 3 when he hurt Wilder badly with a right to the ear before flooring him with a sharp right uppercut and a left hook. The stricken ex-champ rose and shook his head dismissively, but the writing was on the wall – or so we thought.

As Fury found out in their first encounter, when Wilder lands flush with a right hand, the damage can be measured on a Richter scale. Well, it was history revisited in the third chapter when Wilder walked Fury into a sonic-boom right hand in the fourth round. The punch sent a visible shockwave through Fury's torso and deposited him on the canvas. He got up – of course he did – but this time Wilder put him down again in a dramatic session that's been awarded Round of the Year honors for 2021 (Lee Groves' Round of the Year feature appears on Page 44).

"It was a tough old three minutes," admitted Fury with more than a touch of understatement. "When you're sparring in the gym, you're not getting dropped like that, then – bang – all of a sudden you're in a fight where there's three knockdowns in two rounds. It was crazy! That's the first time I've been dropped twice in one round. Everybody thought it was over, but not me. I always knew I was going to get up and win the fight."

Fury-Wilder 3 *needed* that round in order to become a classic. It was as vital as the shower scene in *Psycho* and every bit as terrifying if you were a Fury fan. Even though Wilder only enjoyed sporadic success from the fifth round until the devastating conclusion, it was the omnipresent threat of his brutal right-hand punching that kept fans on the edge of their seats.

Despite the danger, Fury began to close the book in Round 10. After ducking under a left hook, he thumped Wilder with a heavy right to the head that dropped the Alabama star on all fours. Wilder rose gamely, but he was hurt – badly hurt – and absolutely exhausted. But even then, when he had next to no fuel left in the tank, Wilder let his hands go at the end of the round and still looked lethal. It was an incredible effort under fire.

However, it all ended in the penultimate round. Fury landed power shot after power shot and punched the life out of his opponent. A right hand landed with sickening force when Wilder was against the ropes, and a right uppercut raised the American's chin. Fury missed a follow-up left hook, but a massive right hand was the finishing blow.

Even then, Wilder, less than half conscious, *still* tried to get up.

Given this latest defeat and with the success he's already enjoyed (10 defenses of the WBC title over five years), Wilder has suggested that we may have seen the last of him in a boxing ring. After all, he's 36 years old and a multimillionaire with a beautiful family. However, there's no doubt that Wilder could still be a major force, and his former rival would like to see him make a return.

"I'd like to see him fight on, because he has a lot to give to the sport," said Fury graciously. "I still think he's the second-best heavyweight out there, and I still think he knocks everybody out except me – 100 percent."

The Fury-Wilder trilogy has concluded, and both men saved the best for last. ★

Tom Gray is Managing Editor for Ring Magazine. Follow him on Twitter: @Tom_Gray_Boxing.

RUNNERS UP

ROGER GUTIERREZ UD 12 RENE ALVARADO

MASAMICHI YABUKI TKO 10 KENSHIRO TERAJI

JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA SD 12 ROMAN GONZALEZ

STEPHEN FULTON MD 12 BRANDON FIGUEROA

BY TRIS DIXON

GABRIEL ROSADO KO 3 BEKTEMIR MELIKUZIEV

"King" Gabriel Rosado threw a right hand and it missed by the proverbial mile.

It was Round 3 of his fight with unbeaten Uzbek prospect Bektemir Melikuziev and Rosado, often heralded as the gatekeeper of the middleweight division but here stepping up to the 168-pound division, had been down in the first.

That was how the script was supposed to play out on June 19 at the Don Haskins Center in El Paso.

Rosado had been momentarily overwhelmed to the head and body late in Round 1 and hit the canvas, listening to the count and then making it to the bell where he could recover.

Rosado survived the early storm from Melikuziev...

STEVE WILLIAMS/GOLDENBOY

He later said he knew there wasn't long left in the session, so he took the veteran move of taking a knee rather than absorb any more punishing shots.

Fast forward to Round 3 and Rosado was again under pressure, and he threw that right hand as a deterrent trying to keep the aggressive southpaw off him.

"Bek the Bully" sprung back but, as is his custom, leapt forward to attack. Then it happened.

Rosado launched the same shot that had just missed so widely, only this one did not.

Melikuziev tried to scoop in a left hand, but Rosado's right "down the pipe," or perhaps even "round the corner," found its destination first. It lashed against the left side of Melikuziev's face with devastating effect.

It was the perfect storm. Melikuziev was unprotected because his left hand was in motion and he multiplied the force by hurtling in toward the Philadelphia veteran.

For his part, the Freddie Roach-trained Rosado had lured his opponent in with that wayward right, which was well out of range, got Melikuziev to commit in his next attack and then struck. There were only about three seconds between the right hands, but it was the very definition of a trap being set in boxing.

The Uzbek took the bait, and his physical undoing was as dramatic as the blow itself.

His hands dropped limply, he began to tip to his left, and then he pitched sideways in a crumpled heap.

Rosado, who was coming off a close and controversial split decision loss to Danny Jacobs at the back end of 2020, wheeled away and celebrated. He knew he'd thrown the shot of his life and kept his career alive.

It made for a startling image: Melikuziev on his face, one arm in front and one behind, his knees screwed into the canvas but his feet in the air and toes pointed down.

Melikuziev attempted to rise in the corner on autopilot, but gravity wasn't listening. He tried to stand and push himself up from the floor, but he started to fall once more before, finally, he was helped onto his stool and a doctor tried to tell a shell-shocked and dejected Melikuziev, who had lost for the first time in eight pro bouts, what had just happened to him.

"It was one of those fights where I knew I'd have to dig deep because he's a dangerous guy," said Rosado, who celebrated ringside with Golden Boy's Bernard Hopkins, a former Philly middleweight himself. "He's strong and he throws heavy shots with knockout written on them. I always knew I had punching power. It was a matter of sitting on my shots and putting my mind to it. He's a big puncher. I felt his shots to the body earlier in the first round."

Hopkins said he had been able to see Rosado trying to lure Bek in. Rosado said he'd been sparring hard in preparation, ready for the onslaught of the favored Uzbek.

"I was trying to time him. I missed the shot a couple of times in the second round, but I was timing him," Rosado said, breaking down the winning moments. "I caught him. I lured him into the corner, he loaded up and I caught him with that good right hand. It was just one of those shots."

Rosado's emphatic win earned him another big fight, but he would lose on points against Jaime Munguia in November at the Honda Center in Anaheim.

However, the startling knockout of "Bek the Bully" in Texas in June showed everyone that the 36-year-old is still one of the most dependable gatekeepers in the sport. He's also had his fair share of wars, but the Melikuziev fight will be remembered for just one shot.

"It couldn't have happened in a more dramatic fashion," Rosado reflected post-fight. "It's like it had to happen that way." ★

RUNNERS UP

CALLUM SMITH KO 2 LENIN CASTILLO

ANTHONY DIRRELL TKO 4 MARCOS HERNANDEZ

EFE AJAGBA KO 3 BRIAN HOWARD

KIKO MARTINEZ KO 6 KID GALAHAD

...and closed the show with a spectacular KO.

BY RYAN SONGALIA

GEORGE KAMBOSOS JR. SD 12 TEOFIMO LOPEZ

By the time lightweight champ Teofimo Lopez and George Kambosos Jr. finally got to the ring, most people were ready to put the fight in the books already. The bout, a mandatory defense for Lopez, had been moved to eight different dates and six different venues while switching broadcast platforms from Triller to DAZN.

The expectation was that Lopez, a 13-to-1 betting favorite, would dispose of the undefeated but unheralded Australian challenger, who was best known for being

Lopez got overconfident against Kambosos and paid dearly.

Manny Pacquiao's sparring partner for three training camps. The momentum from the Brooklynite's title victories over IBF beltholder Richard Commey and Ring champ Vasiliy Lomachenko had cooled off, but a win could put "The Takeover" back on course for significant fights in 2022.

It looked early on that Lopez may just end matters in a hurry. He rushed out of the corner looking to put Kambosos down, knockout written on each punch he threw. But Kambosos was able to avoid or roll with most of them, taking much of the effectiveness off the blows.

The first-round knockout that Lopez had in mind never came to fruition. Instead, it was he who was on the floor. With 15 seconds remaining in the round, Lopez threw a lazy jab that was countered by a right hand from Kambosos, producing the knockdown. Lopez rose almost immediately, an embarrassed smile on his face. The message had been sent, loud and clear, that Kambosos wasn't going to be blown over as many had expected.

Between rounds, Lopez received conflicting messages, with little direction about how to implement any of it. "Take your time," Teofimo Lopez Sr. told his son, moments before urging him to "Finish him, already!"

Kambosos didn't have the size or power that Lopez was blessed with, but he had a game plan and he stuck to it. Kambosos continued to pump his jab, offsetting his opponent's aggression. Lopez was reduced to his rage, carrying with him the bad blood that had been present since the fight's first press conference. Just as he mimed digging a grave following his 2019 knockout of Diego Magdaleno, Lopez found himself digging a hole by not investing in body punching or trying to win rounds.

Instead it was Kambosos who was winning rounds, working consistently and evading most of the home run swings from Lopez. Still, Lopez never stopped being dangerous. By Round 8, Lopez began finding the target with his heavy right hands, and a series of rights hurt Kambosos late in the ninth.

The momentum had switched to Lopez, who came out for the 10th looking to bail himself out of an undisciplined performance. With two minutes left in the round, Lopez landed a pair of right hands that sent Kambosos to the canvas. In boxing terms, there was an eternity for Lopez to put Kambosos away, but the granite-chinned challenger stood up to the punches even as he attempted his own while stumbling away.

Lopez barreled forward, trying to land knockout blows with little setup to them. Against the odds, Kambosos made it out of the round.

The 11th began where the 10th ended, or at least it did in Lopez's mind. But the previous round had emptied his gas tank, and his punch output dipped to a fight low of 32 attempts. The ensuing momentum swing was highlighted by a significant cut over Lopez's left eye, which required an examination from the doctor mid-round. The blood reinvigorated Kambosos, who began targeting the cut with his right hand.

Lopez walked away dismissively at the final bell, while Kambosos offered him one last defiant push before celebrating. The consensus on press row was that while Kambosos won the fight, Lopez was the bigger name and would get the decision. That fear was only realized on one of the scorecards, as the 114-113 score turned in by Don Trella was overruled by the 115-111 and 115-112 scores from Frank Lombardi and Glenn Feldman, respectively.

The win earned Kambosos three sanctioning body titles, plus the Ring Magazine lightweight championship. While there was no knockout during the fight itself, Kambosos floored Lopez with a parting blow in the post-fight interview.

"I don't believe it was a close fight," said Lopez, adding that he felt he won the fight, 10 rounds to two.

"You're a bit delusional, brother," replied Kambosos.

The win quickly entered the pantheon of greatest in Australian boxing history (see Don Stradley's feature on Page 60). Not only had Kambosos upset the odds, he had done so in Lopez's hometown, at The Theater at Madison Square Garden in New York City, without any controversy.

Kambosos capitalized on his victory by making the media rounds in the United States, then returned home to a hero's welcome. ★

RUNNERS UP

SANDOR MARTIN MD 10 MIKEY GARCIA

LEIGH WOOD TKO 12 XU CAN

MAURICIO LARA TKO 9 JOSH WARRINGTON

KIKO MARTINEZ KO 6 KID GALAHAD

PROSPECT OF THE YEAR

BY ANSON WAINWRIGHT

BRANDUN LEE

RUNNERS UP

DAVID PICASSO

FRANK MARTIN

OMAR AGUILAR

XANDER ZAYAS

Brandun Lee fought three times for a total of 11 rounds in 2021. It wasn't a lot of ring time, but his performances cemented his reputation as one of the best young prospects in boxing.

The talented junior welterweight is a noted puncher, accounting for 22 of the wins in his 24-0 record ending inside the distance. However, Lee is more than a knockout artist. He possesses quick hands, a measured jab, and he likes to go to the body.

The 22-year-old became the first pro boxer to stop Samuel Teah (KO 3) in March and then Ezequiel Fernandez (KO 1) in August. He closed out his 2021 campaign by knocking out once-beaten Juan Heraldez (KO 7) on December 11.

"My development for this year was great as a fighter inside and outside the ring," Lee told The Ring. "I showed that I can punch and I know how to box. I'm a great puncher and a better boxer.

"I'm growing into my body every day, and every day I feel stronger. I showed the boxing world that a star is coming, and I gained many new fans."

Lee was born into a boxing family. His grandfather was a trainer for two uncles who boxed at a high level on the amateur scene in the 1970s and '80s. His father, who was born in South Korea and later moved to California, built a gym in which Brandun spent a lot of time watching his older brother train.

Lee entered his first tournament when he was 8. By the time he was 13, he was struggling to find opponents.

"We used to go out on the weekend to fight, and in Northern California, boxing wasn't as popular," he explained. "There was only one or two shows on a Saturday. It took me about a month to clear out Northern California, and nobody would want to fight me.

"Eventually we went to Central California, and [it was] the same thing there. Then we went to Southern California and that took a while. Southern California is the capital of boxing worldwide.

"Since I look Chinese, the Mexicans used to tell my father, 'We'll fight the little Chinese kid.' I used that to my advantage so I could get a fight and learn and use my skills. [Eventually] there was only national tournaments."

Lee, who compiled an impressive 196-5 record as an amateur, never fought in the senior ranks. However, he won the Junior Golden Gloves on four occasions, the Junior Silver Gloves three times, and the Junior PAL five times.

Lee gained valuable experience against top-level pros as an amateur teenager. His father and trainer, Bobby, took him around California to secure sparring against the likes of Tim Bradley, Mikey Garcia, Vergil Ortiz, Devin Haney and Ryan Garcia.

Brandun signed a promotional contract with Cameron Dunkin of D&D Boxing in the fall of 2016 and debuted shortly afterward at just 17 years old.

"I'm really pleased with how Brandun has stood up this year," said Dunkin, who has helped to guide 35 fighters to world titles, including Bradley, Kelly Pavlik, Terence Crawford and Nonito Donaire. "He's coming into his own and improving every time. It won't be long until we let him off the leash."

Former Ring Editor-In-Chief Steve Farhood, who now serves as an on-air analyst for Showtime's ShoBox series, has observed several of Lee's fights live and sees considerable potential.

"Lee's KO win over Heraldez was near-perfect," said Farhood. "Facing the best opponent of his career, Lee went rounds and still managed to score a devastating KO.

"Lee's power is real, and against Heraldez, he showed dimensions by boxing and emphasizing his jab. Still, I feel his best attributes, and those that will serve him well long-term, are his intelligence, maturity and demeanor.

"Lee is still very young, but by the end of 2022, I'd expect him to have faced a legitimate top-10 contender at 140 pounds."

Lee, who is majoring in criminal justice at the University of San Bernardino, feels 2021 was great for his development, but he says there's much more to come.

"I thought this was going to be my breakout year," he said. "Unfortunately, COVID still carried on from 2020. So, most definitely, 2022 is going to be my year."

For now, Lee is The Ring's Prospect of the Year. ★

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

HARRY HOW

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

BY DIEGO MORILLA

Martinez KOs Galahad to become world champ all over again.

KIKO MARTINEZ

Most fighters need a reason to motivate themselves to get in the gym. Fame, fortune and family are often mentioned.

For Spain's Francisco "Kiko" Martinez, it's the frightening, rattling, earth-shaking sound of a passing train.

"I knew I could win because I fully focused on that," said Martinez in a telephone interview from Spain. "I traveled to the U.S. alone with a backpack and I knew I would win because I knew it was my last train.

And when you see the last train, you give it all you have because you know you're not going to have another chance."

Even though the subject of The Ring's interview was Martinez's fight against Kid Galahad in November 2021, Kiko was referring to a different event. He was discussing his first world title fight, in Atlantic City against Colombia's Jonathan "Momo" Romero back in 2013, when he lifted the IBF junior featherweight belt.

Even back then, Martinez feared that the passing of the old "Father Time Express" would leave him behind, stranded and heartbroken in the station. Unfortunately, his ride lasted only a year before he lost the belt to Carl Frampton.

But a different destiny was written for Martinez, who, at the age of 35, knocked out Galahad in Sheffield to win the IBF featherweight title, matching the two-division accomplishment of his countryman and hero, Javier Castillejo, shocking the world in the process – and earning The Ring's Comeback of the Year award.

Martinez had a reportedly spectacular unbeaten run as an amateur, notching 40 wins with 38 stoppages before making the transition to the pro ranks, where he stands at 43-10-2 and 30 knockouts. He started boxing at the age of 13 "to defend myself, because my parents worked all the time and I was out in the streets all day. All I wanted was to defend myself, because kids would constantly pick on me and my brothers."

Fast-forward 20 years, and Martinez's mission of earning respect for himself and his kin has come a long way. With his demolition of a highly regarded British standout such as Galahad, Martinez joins fellow upset-minded Spaniard Sandor Martin (who recently delivered another major surprise with his decision victory over four-division titleholder Mikey Garcia) on a list of exciting Spanish fighters to watch in the near future. Spain lacks an obvious Hall of Fame-caliber fighter to boast, thus it was never given the consideration that other countries may have – but all of that can change, as it had before.

"When I lost my title belt against Frampton in Northern Ireland, things began to go bad for me," said Martinez. "I had a chance against [Scott] Quigg; I had another chance against Leo Santa Cruz, another one with Gary Russell Jr., and the truth is that I suffered one failure after another. But after fighting Josh Warrington and understanding that I could improve day by day if I made some changes, I tried to make those changes. Being more relaxed, having better training camps."

Wishing upon a star or a train passing by makes no difference in the real world, where lucky charms and amulets hardly affect human behavior. Martinez knows that, and that's why he took fate into his own hands with a dedication worthy of much greater challenges.

"I have lived like a monk, with no vacations or days off. I have trained and taken care of my body 365 days a year," said Martinez. In a time of prolonged lockdowns and the uncertainty that affected every fighter's career, Martinez repurposed himself and devoted his life to a strict training regimen with his family as his main inspiration.

"I promised myself that my daughters would remember me as world champion. When I was world champ the first time, one had not yet been born and the other one was very little. So I focused exclusively to demonstrate to my daughters that you can fall and rise again, and I wanted them to see it, to know that this can be done with discipline and with a clear goal in mind, and especially with a great attitude."

Currently handled and promoted by former middleweight champion Sergio Martinez (no relation), Kiko wants to continue fighting regularly in the British Isles, where he has developed a following.

RUNNERS UP

NONITO DONAIRE KO 4 NORDINE OUBAALI

JONATHAN GONZALEZ SD 12 ELWIN SOTO

"I worked throughout my whole career in the U.K. and Ireland. I have a lot of fans there; everyone knows me and they know that I always give my best in the ring. But they didn't realize that I was not going to go there just to show up," he said, discussing the Galahad fight, which he hopes is only the first in a new series of successful incursions.

If it does happen, Martinez claims he would be as ready as he was the first time, and for the same reasons.

"I took good care of myself during the COVID pandemic. I trained hard during the past three or four years and was super-focused again to win a world title, and I was going to use my chance because this was truly the last train I would ever have," he said. "I had to change everything; all of the things I did for training were revised and changed. And above all, I started training in my home, surrounded by my family. … I was doing my training camps away from them, and it was becoming really difficult. I believe that a big part of my evolution was to train at home and be surrounded by my family."

And the future?

"One more year, and I will retire," said Martinez. "I hope to unify my title with other world champions. I love to know that my dreams, my hard work and my dedication earned me a spot in the history of Spanish boxing. This motivates me a lot, and it gives me a great sense of pride as a person."

One more year. Unless, of course, the rumbling of a passing train rattles Kiko's window and makes him wish for one more trip in search of glory. ★

BY DOUG FISCHER

EDDY REYNOSO

For much of the 2010s, Eddy Reynoso was only known to U.S. media and fans as Canelo Alvarez's co-trainer (along with his father, Chepo Reynoso). Eddy took the reins as Alvarez's head trainer by the middle of the decade, but it would still be years before he received any credit for the Mexican star's steady evolution into an elite boxer.

It wasn't until the end of the decade, when Reynoso took on other notable fighters, including featherweight titleholder Oscar Valdez, flyweight beltholder Julio Cesar Martinez and lightweight up-and-comer Ryan Garcia, that the young veteran – still in his early 40s – was recognized as a top trainer. He earned The Ring's 2019 Trainer of the Year award and continued to build his "No Boxing No Life" stable in 2020 by adding two heavyweight hopefuls, prospect Frank Sanchez and former unified titleholder Andy Ruiz, to the roster.

At the close of 2020, Reynoso was confident enough in his fighters and his ability as a trainer to tell the media that his team was poised for a banner 2021. However, with the exception of Alvarez, the jury was out on whether his newer recruits could live up to his ambitions.

Alvarez was heavily favored to beat his targeted foes en route to his goal of being crowned undisputed super middleweight

Reynoso and Canelo have proven to be a formidable team.

champion by the end of the year, but Reynoso's other fighters had their share of doubters.

Garcia had the talent, look and charisma of a main event attraction, but the popular Californian had yet to face a world-class fighter. That would change when he took on Olympic gold medalist Luke Campbell in January. If Garcia was more Instagram star than fighter, it would be exposed by the British southpaw, who competed well against Jorge Linares and Vasiliy Lomachenko in Ring championship bouts.

Valdez was a decided underdog going into his February showdown with Miguel Berchelt. Critics claimed the former 126-pounder was undersized and one-dimensional, a sitting duck for The Ring's No. 1-rated junior lightweight, who had stopped 15 of his previous 16 opponents.

Sanchez was stuck with the same questions that plague most Cuban boxers: Had his best years come during his amateur career? Could he acclimate to the pro style (and in his case, the training system of a Mexican coach)? He would face his sternest test as a pro against fellow unbeaten prospect Efe Ajagba on the PPV undercard of the Fury-Wilder rubber match.

Ruiz was battle-tested but was viewed as "uncoachable" following his disappointing rematch loss to Anthony Joshua in late 2019. He joined Reynoso's stable in the summer of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. So, unlike Valdez, Garcia and Sanchez, who had multiple camps and bouts with Reynoso under their belts going into 2021, Ruiz's PPV headliner against Chris Arreola in May would be his first bout with Eddy in his corner.

Ruiz was a heavy odds favorite to beat the former contender, but fans and insiders were skeptical that Reynoso could help the gifted but often-overweight banger realize his potential. If Ruiz showed up as heavy and unmotivated for Arreola as he did for the Joshua rematch, it wasn't inconceivable that the rededicated veteran – who had set CompuBox's record for the most punches thrown by a heavyweight in his previous bout (a decision loss to Adam Kownacki) – could score an upset.

That didn't happen, but Ruiz had to get up from a second-round knockdown and survive wobbly moments in the early going vs. Arreola. Being in great shape and weighing 27½ pounds lighter than he did for the Joshua rematch helped him get through the rough spots, but much-improved focus and technique is what enabled Ruiz to win a wide unanimous decision. His usual swarming hooks and crosses were replaced with fast and accurate jabs and straight rights to the body and head as he outclassed Arreola over the second half of the fight.

Garcia also had to get up from a second-round knockdown against Campbell. Like Ruiz, he dealt with the adversity and used sharp jabs and straight rights to regain control of the bout. However, it was a paralyzing left hook to Campbell's liver that ended the bout in Round 7.

Garcia, who was as impetuous as he was explosive in spots during the fight, is still a work in progress, but Reynoso was pleased that the young man followed their fight plan.

"The punch that ended the fight was a body shot that we practiced throughout camp," Reynoso told The Ring through translator Constantino Garcia. "Ryan is learning; that's what is important. In time, he will be as composed as Andy is. With Andy, the most important thing was showing discipline in camp. He did that. And he returned, after a year and a half out of the ring, to fight 12 hard rounds in excellent physical condition."

Discipline and conditioning are never a problem for Valdez, who loves to train and fight, but against Berchelt he needed to box a near-perfect fight. Reynoso believes Valdez was perfect as he outclassed Berchelt en route to a brutal one-punch KO in Round 11.

"What Valdez did was simply a work of art," said Reynoso. "He boxed when he needed to. He set traps and he punched when it was time. He did an excellent job. What he did in the fight was 100 percent what we practiced in the gym."

Sanchez also did an excellent job of boxing and setting traps against Ajagba, neutralizing the feared puncher's aggression with lateral movement while surprising him with counter rights. One of those counters scored a seventh-round knockdown that helped Sanchez win a 10-round decision and later crack The Ring's heavyweight rankings.

"Frank beat a fighter who was on his way to facing the elite heavyweights," said Reynoso. "Now Frank is the one to watch in the division."

All of Reynoso's fighters are players in their respective divisions. Their victories fulfilled Reynoso's prophecy of a banner 2021 and clinched his second Ring Magazine Trainer of the Year award.

"This is something that every coach dreams of, something very important for my career," Reynoso said. "I thank God and all the boxers I work with for always being in my corner and helping me achieve this dream. As a Mexican, I'm proud to be the first to win two Ring Magazine Trainer of the Year awards.

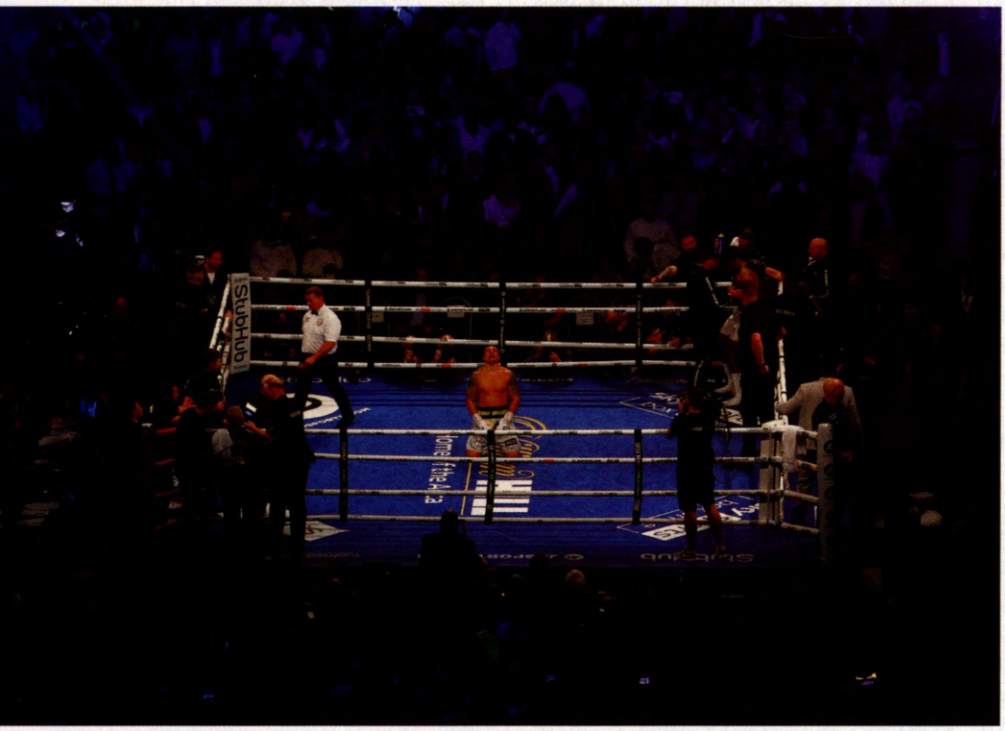
"This year, the victories were extra special. I will never forget what my fighters achieved in 2021, because some were underdogs, others were in bouts where everything was at stake."

The stakes will be higher in 2022. Valdez is in position to unify the WBC belt he won from Berchelt with one of the other 130-pound titleholders. Ruiz, Garcia and Sanchez will aim for world title shots.

"My goal for 2022 is to win Trainer of the Year again," he said. "I have no limits. I love my job and I have the best boxers. I don't need anything else to be able to achieve it, only my health." ★

BY GARETH A DAVIES

ANTHONY JOSHUA VS. OLEKSANDR USYK



Usyk's decision win over Joshua was an electrifying occasion.

"Nothing prepares you for being the heavyweight champion of the world. You are learning on the job. It is as simple as that." The very real words of the great George Foreman. He knows. So does Anthony Joshua.

But "AJ" and "Big George" also share one of boxing's most painful lessons: The heavyweight title comes and goes.

Joshua and Oleksandr Usyk contested what The Ring has deemed the Event of The Year on September 25 for the IBF, WBA and WBO belts held by the Briton on a night at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, where the walls came tumbling down.

Styles make fights, as one of boxing's most truthful axioms runs, and it was there in Technicolor at the soccer stadium, witnessed by 68,000 fans live in a raucous melee and by the millions watching screens around the world. This was Joshua's fifth giant stadium fight in the U.K., a total of 320,000 fans having filled Wembley Stadium in London twice and the Principality Stadium in Cardiff on two occasions. The atmosphere at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium was off the scale, full of jubilance, given that it was the first huge fight in a stadium in the U.K. since the plight of COVID-19.

It was always Joshua's fight to lose against the unbeaten Ukrainian, who presented arguably the greatest challenge, in pure boxing terms, of the Londoner's decorated career. The afternoon before the fight, Joshua had weighed in at 240 pounds, long and lean, while Usyk stepped on the scales the heaviest of his career at 221¼ pounds.

Joshua had told me in a quiet moment post-weigh-in at the O2 Arena in London's docklands that he had seen in Usyk's eyes, as they stared each other down at the weigh-in with a deep intensity, a desire for a classic from the Ukrainian.

"I saw in him an opponent who wants to have fun in this fight. I can see he wants to have a fast chess match. I am fully ready. I am prepared to go the full 12 rounds and defeat Usyk, but if I have to put hand on heart, I believe I will stop him close to the 10th round."

It was self-evident that the defending champion had to make his size, power and weight advantages tell from the outset, establish a rhythm and impose himself on the

BY LEE GROVES

TYSON FURY-DEONTAY WILDER III: ROUND 4

All three installments of the Tyson Fury-Deontay Wilder trilogy were defined by their unpredictability and explosiveness. Before the first fight in December 2018, many wondered if the former Ring Magazine heavyweight champ could even compete with the hard-punching WBC titleholder after just two preparatory fights against Sefer Seferi (TKO 4) and Francesco Pianeta (W 10) following two-and-a-half years out of the ring. Not only did Fury compete, he outboxed Wilder for long stretches. Just when it appeared Fury was about to win the WBC title on points, Wilder scored his second knockdown of the fight in Round 12 with a titanic cross-hook that put Fury on his back. To the shock of many, Fury rose to his feet and finished the fight. The final plot twist occurred when all three judges perceived a different result: One voted for Fury, one voted for Wilder and one voted for neither. A draw.

The February 2020 rematch was even more surprising than the original, but, in retrospect, the fight was defined by the fact that Fury called his shot in every possible way and defied conventional wisdom in doing so. He said he would scale 270 pounds and he weighed 273. Fury asserted he would take the fight to Wilder despite the two knockdowns he suffered in Fight One and he did. Fury declared he would knock down Wilder and he did it twice. Finally, Fury insisted he would knock out the heavier-hitting "Bronze Bomber," and

Whatever Wilder hits, he destroys... unless it's Fury.

thanks to the compassionate move of co-trainer Mark Breland, Fury scored a seventh-round TKO, regaining The Ring title and winning the WBC belt in the process, while leaving Wilder battered, bloodied and broken.

Their third meeting wasn't even supposed to take place; Fury announced on social media that a fight for the undisputed heavyweight championship against then-unified titleholder Anthony Joshua was set for August 14 in Saudi Arabia. The boxing world cheered. Just a few hours later, the excitement turned to anger and confusion as a U.S. judge ruled that Wilder had the right to invoke the immediate rematch clause embedded in the contract for Fight Two. Being the warrior he was, Wilder gave the green light. Reports of a potential $20 million step-aside offer to Wilder circulated, but Wilder held firm. Instead of Fury-Joshua I, we had Fury-Wilder III.

The pre-fight buildup turned disappointment into anticipation, and that anticipation reached a peak moments before the opening bell rang on October 9 inside the T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas. Fury again predicted he would destroy Wilder, and when he floored the ex-champion in the final minute of Round 3 with a right to the temple, the table for Fury's seemingly inevitable KO victory appeared set.

Then came Round 4, a round that encapsulated the series' thrilling combustibility in three short minutes and transformed Fury-Wilder III from just another heavyweight championship blowout into a potential modern classic. For these reasons, it was named The Ring's 2021 Round of the Year.

The round began with the still-shaky Wilder on the retreat and Fury pinning the challenger to the ropes and leaning on him, intelligently maximizing his 39-pound weight advantage. Fury's mauling and brawling continued through the first two minutes, and according to Fan Duel's Live Moneyline Odds, Fury was a prohibitive -3000 choice while Wilder was at +1400, an indicator of how much the tide had turned in Fury's favor.

But with 56 seconds remaining, Wilder caught Fury coming in with a pinpoint cross to the temple. The effects of the blow reverberated through Fury's body like a wrecking ball striking a skyscraper's skeleton; the foundation shuddered, the underpinnings collapsed and the rubble was splayed in front of the red corner pad. The 15,820 spectators inside the T-Mobile arena erupted at this shocking turn of events and a triumphant and re-energized Wilder raised his right fist and strode toward the neutral corner.

Just as he did in Round 12 of the first fight, Fury internally rewired himself with stunning speed and regained enough awareness to rise at referee Russell Mora's count of seven. The action resumed 23 seconds after Fury hit the floor, and, for the first time in the match, there was genuine suspense and electric excitement. As pumped-up ringsiders stood as one, Wilder gunned for the finish with blows that wildly missed the target, and Fury even connected with a heavy right to the side of the challenger's head. Moments later, however, Wilder landed a cuffing right high on the head and Fury tumbled to the canvas for the second time.

Seventeen seconds remained in this topsy-turvy round, and as Fury sat on the floor, his expressive face told the story: surprise at being knocked down again, an almost imperceptible nod to his corner that he was still in control of his faculties, mustering up the energy to rise again and steeling himself for what was to come. Because Wilder wandered from the neutral corner, Mora stopped his count and ordered Wilder to comply with the rules, a development that gave Fury extra seconds of recovery time.

This time, Fury regained his feet at Mora's count of six, and by the time Mora completed his mandatory eight count and finished the post-knockdown protocols, the round-ending bell had sounded.

ESPN commentator Andre Ward correctly pointed out the slowness of Mora's counts on both knockdowns – reviving a controversy that applied to the 12th-round knockdown in Fight One. Here, in terms of real time, Fury regained his feet within nine seconds after suffering the first knockdown, and although Fury required nearly 11 seconds to do so after the second knockdown, the argument for a "long count" in Fury's favor was eliminated by Mora correctly stopping his count to redirect Wilder seven actual seconds after Fury struck the ground and by Fury already being on his feet by the time Mora resumed his count. While it's true Fury benefited from the extra time Mora used to ascertain Fury's condition, Fury himself complied with the rules.

The events of Round 4 established a new, exciting narrative that continued for the remainder of the bout. Because of that, this slice of time is being immortalized. ★

RUNNERS UP

ESTRADA-GONZALEZ 2
(ROUND 12)

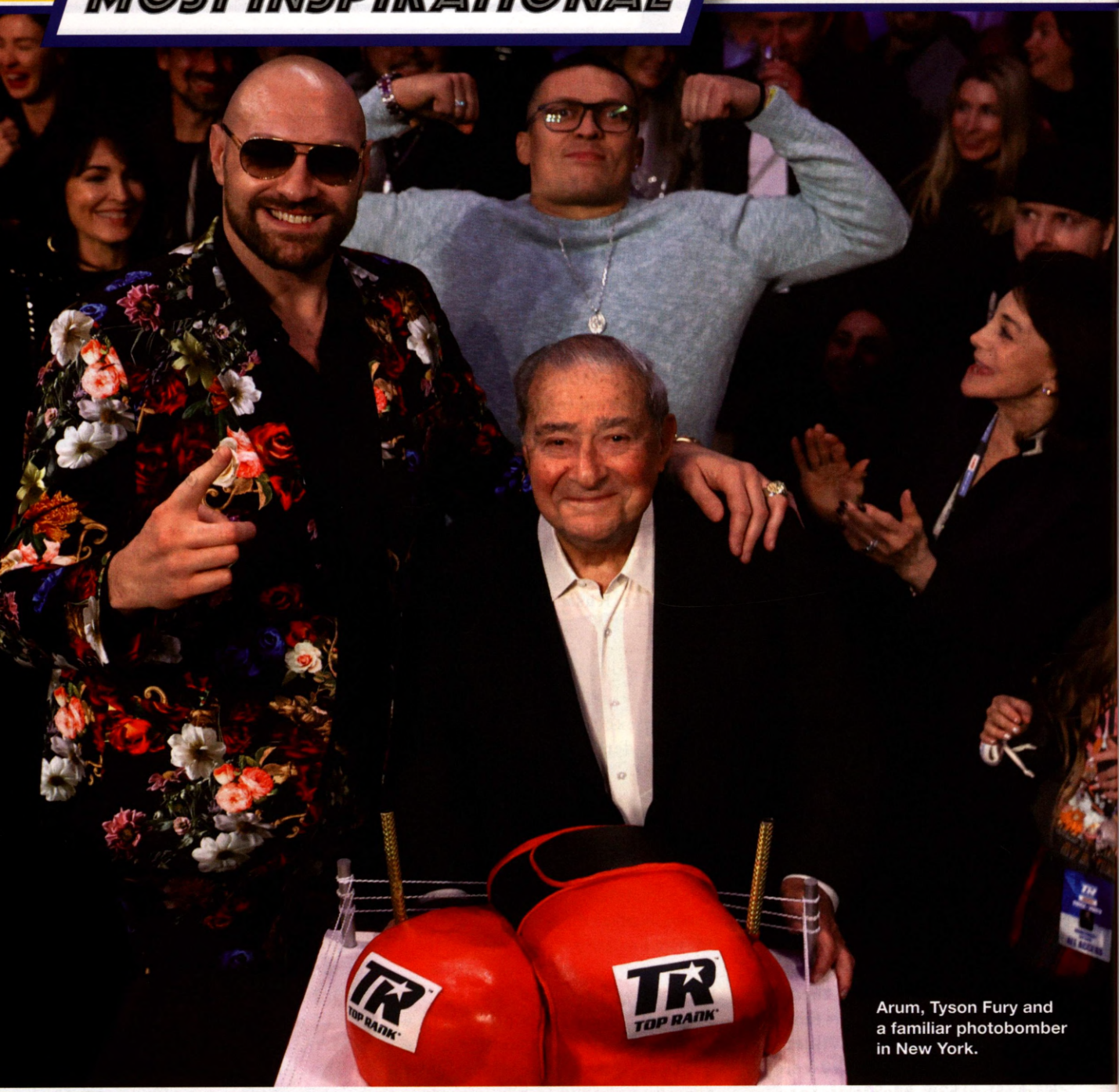
GALAHAD-MARTINEZ
(ROUND 5)

DAVIS-BARRIOS
(ROUND 8)

FULTON-FIGUEROA
(ROUND 10)

Lee Groves is a boxing writer and historian based in Friendly, West Virginia. He is a full member of the BWAA, from which he has won 20 writing awards, including two first-place awards, since 2006. Email Groves, l.groves@frontier.com, or send him a message via Facebook and Twitter @leegrovesboxing.

BY NORM FRAUENHEIM



Arum, Tyson Fury and a familiar photobomber in New York.

BOB ARUM

It was a birthday party, a rare one. Not many people get the chance to celebrate the beginning of their 10th decade. But Bob Arum did, at home in New York on December 8.

That's when he got a call from an old rival. An older one, too. Don King, who is nearly four months older, was calling to wish Arum a happy birthday.

"We never agreed about much of anything," Arum said, "but this time we agreed that we screwed the world by still being alive at 90."

The world – at least the boxing world – says thank you, especially to the tireless, ever-resilient Arum.

It's been one wild ride, really a journey through countless time zones and many decades. The good news: It isn't over. It's hard to imagine boxing without Arum. From ardent fan to casual observer, the Top Rank promoter has always been there, front-and-center in a ringside seat or at the bully pulpit. Running to the fight, instead of away from one, is his business. His lifestyle, too.

Appropriately enough, Arum spent part of his birthday aboard a flight home to New York to promote his 2,120th card, which featured Vasiliy Lomachenko-Richard Commey at Madison Square Garden. He's probably spent as much time in an airline seat as he has in a ringside seat. He might have enough frequent-flier miles for a free ride into space alongside fellow 90-year-old William Shatner the next time Jeff Bezos decides to launch.

Despite all the mileage over the years, there's never been any jet lag. No lag at all. Name the continent. Name the planet. Arum will be there, if the fight and the price is right. His longevity is perhaps the result of good genes.

"I'm lucky, blessed," he says.

But his good fortune is more than just a personal blessing. Boxing has benefited. It has survived the pandemic in large part because of Arum's efforts to beat COVID-19 by staging cards without fans in a so-called bubble. The NBA (National Basketball Association) liked the idea and moved its 2020 playoffs into a bubble.

"We lost a fortune, but we kept our fighters busy," Arum said.

Through it all, there's been controversy, of course. The sport is the bloody definition of conflict, after all. Arum has had his scrapes, notably with King throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Like the sport, however, he survives. For at least the last two decades, there have been questions about why he continues.

In 2010, there were days when media members and fans wondered whether Arum would retire. His son, 49-year-old John Arum, a well-known environmental attorney in Seattle, died in a tragic accident while hiking in the Cascade Mountains in late August of that fateful year. Arum, then 79, mourned like any father would have. Weeks later, however, he was back, promoting Manny Pacquiao's victory over Antonio Margarito at the Dallas Cowboys' stadium in Arlington, Texas.

"I know the questions," Arum said when asked about how often – or even whether – he has ever considered retirement. "I understand them. But it's like a guy who loves to golf. He loves to play, no matter how old he is. I love boxing. I love being around the fighters. I love promoting legends and prospects. For me, it's like golf, except I also get paid. Why would I quit?"

It's a love that was discovered about 55 years ago. It's an old story, but it's worth repeating. Arum was an attorney working for the Department of Justice. He was part of an investigation involving Sonny Liston's suspicious first-round KO of Floyd Patterson in Chicago in September 1962.

While investigating, Arum got interested in promoting. Jim Brown, a legendary running back for the Cleveland Browns, recommended that he jump headfirst into the fray and promote Muhammad Ali. Intrigued, Arum negotiated a deal for Ali to fight George Chuvalo. "The Greatest" was supposed to face Ernie Terrell in Chicago. But controversy about Ali and his opposition to the Vietnam War had already erupted. Terrell and Chicago were replaced by Chuvalo and Toronto, where Ali won a unanimous decision in March 1966. If not for the controversy, Arum might have gone back to life as an attorney.

"I wouldn't have stayed, but I was just so angry at what they were doing to Ali," Arum said.

Turns out the controversy brought out the fighter in Arum. He stuck around. Went the distance. He promoted 26 more Ali fights in a career that has continued for more than half a century.

Over the next several fights after the promotional debut, Arum said he developed his love for the craft. It's a passion often expressed angrily at reporters or commissioners or anybody else who he believes has treated one of his fighters unfairly. He defended Margarito against altered hand-wrap allegations. He defended Oscar Valdez Jr. against social-media demands that he be suspended for a positive test of a substance banned outright by VADA but not by WADA.

The noisy battles are vintage Arum. They also are an expression of a man vigilant about his business. There's an old rule in boxing: Protect yourself at all times. Arum does. For as far back as he can remember, longtime matchmaker Bruce Trampler has watched Arum watch undercard bouts from his ringside seat, winter rain or desert sun. He was there, behind Las Vegas' Caesars Palace, for bouts on summer undercards in an outdoor ring during 100-degree temperatures. He was there, beneath an umbrella, as chilly rain swept across Carson, California, throughout a card featuring Oscar Valdez Jr.'s bloody decision over Scott Quigg on March 10, 2018, on a night when the media stayed dry and warm while watching the telecast from a nearby room.

"He was there," Trampler said. "He's still there."

He is. ★

RUNNERS UP

CANELO ALVAREZ (DONATING MONEY TO CHILDREN'S CANCER FUND)

TYSON FURY (DONATING MONEY TO LIVERPOOL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL)

SHAKUR STEVENSON TKO 10 JAMEL HERRING

Although just 24 years old, Shakur Stevenson looked like a grown-ass man against Jamel Herring during their junior lightweight title fight on October 23 in Atlanta. Stevenson (17-0, 9 knockouts) pitched a virtual shutout through nine rounds, busting up the former Marine's face, before referee Mark Nelson stopped the bloodbath in the 10th.

"I want to be a superstar in the sport," Stevenson said moments after the bout. "I'm here to last. I take my craft very seriously. I'm disciplined."

It wasn't just that he beat Herring; it was *how* he beat Herring. Coming

Stevenson displayed elite-level skills in his biggest fight.

in, Stevenson had been criticized by some fans as a fighter who played it too safe, preferring to stay on his back foot and land pitty-pat potshots that had little effect on his opponents. At the State Farm Arena in Atlanta, however, it was the complete opposite. He pushed Herring back from the opening bell, even manhandling him at times. His hand speed advantage was apparent throughout. CompuBox credited Stevenson with landing 164 of 530 total punches (31 percent), nearly doubling Herring's output with a higher connect rate.

Shakur had made his point.

Long gone were the memories of a young Stevenson crying after losing to Cuban Robeisy Ramirez in the gold medal match of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Long gone were the questions of whether the Newark, New Jersey, native had the "man strength" to contend with grown men in the pro ranks. For all of the media hype in recent years about the new generation of American up-and-comers like Gervonta Davis (26-0, 24 KOs), Teofimo Lopez (16-1, 12 KOs), Devin Haney (27-0, 15 KOs) and Ryan Garcia (21-0, 18 KOs), Stevenson's name was often left out. Those days are over. In fact, many now feel that Shakur has the most upside of the "Fab Five."

His virtuoso performance against Herring, who had won seven straight fights coming in, launched Stevenson into a new stratosphere. Now a two-division titleholder, Shakur is currently rated No. 1 at 130 pounds by The Ring and in great position for big things going forward. His goal is to unify his WBO belt with another junior lightweight title next year.

Immediately after beating Herring, Stevenson called out Oscar Valdez, who holds the WBC version of the division championship. "There's only one fight left at the end of the day; Oscar can't keep ducking," he said. "It's time for him to fight. There's nothing else to look forward to. The 130-pound division needs to unify. Let's get it!"

Valdez (30-0, 23 KOs), like Stevenson, is promoted by Top Rank, which makes a unification fight between them fairly easy to put together. Kenichi Ogawa (26-1-1, 18 KOs) of Japan has the IBF belt and Roger Gutierrez (26-3-1, 20 KOs) of Venezuela has the WBA belt. The question is: Are any of them willing to face Stevenson to consolidate titles?

RUNNERS UP

BRANDON FIGUEROA
KO 7 LUIS NERY

TERENCE CRAWFORD
TKO 10 SHAWN PORTER

NONITO DONAIRE KO 4
NORDINE OUBAALI

VASILIY LOMACHENKO
UD 12 RICHARD COMMEY

If not, there are other options. Emanuel Navarrete (35-1, 29 KOs), The Ring's No. 1-rated featherweight, would be a compelling opponent for Stevenson. The Mexican, himself a two-division titleholder, is also promoted by Top Rank. And don't forget about Vasiliy Lomachenko (15-2, 11 KOs), currently rated No. 2 at lightweight by The Ring. The Ukrainian star has been with Top Rank since turning pro in 2013. A grudge match with Ramirez (8-1, 4 KOs), currently campaigning at featherweight, is another Top Rank fighter who would make for an interesting matchup since they have history together in the amateurs.

Stevenson has also called out Chris Colbert (16-0, 6 KOs), another young American standout. When George Kambosos Jr. (20-0, 10 KOs) upset Lopez on November 27 to win the undisputed lightweight championship, Stevenson congratulated him on Twitter. He also tweeted that he would be willing to travel to the Australian's homeland to challenge him for his titles.

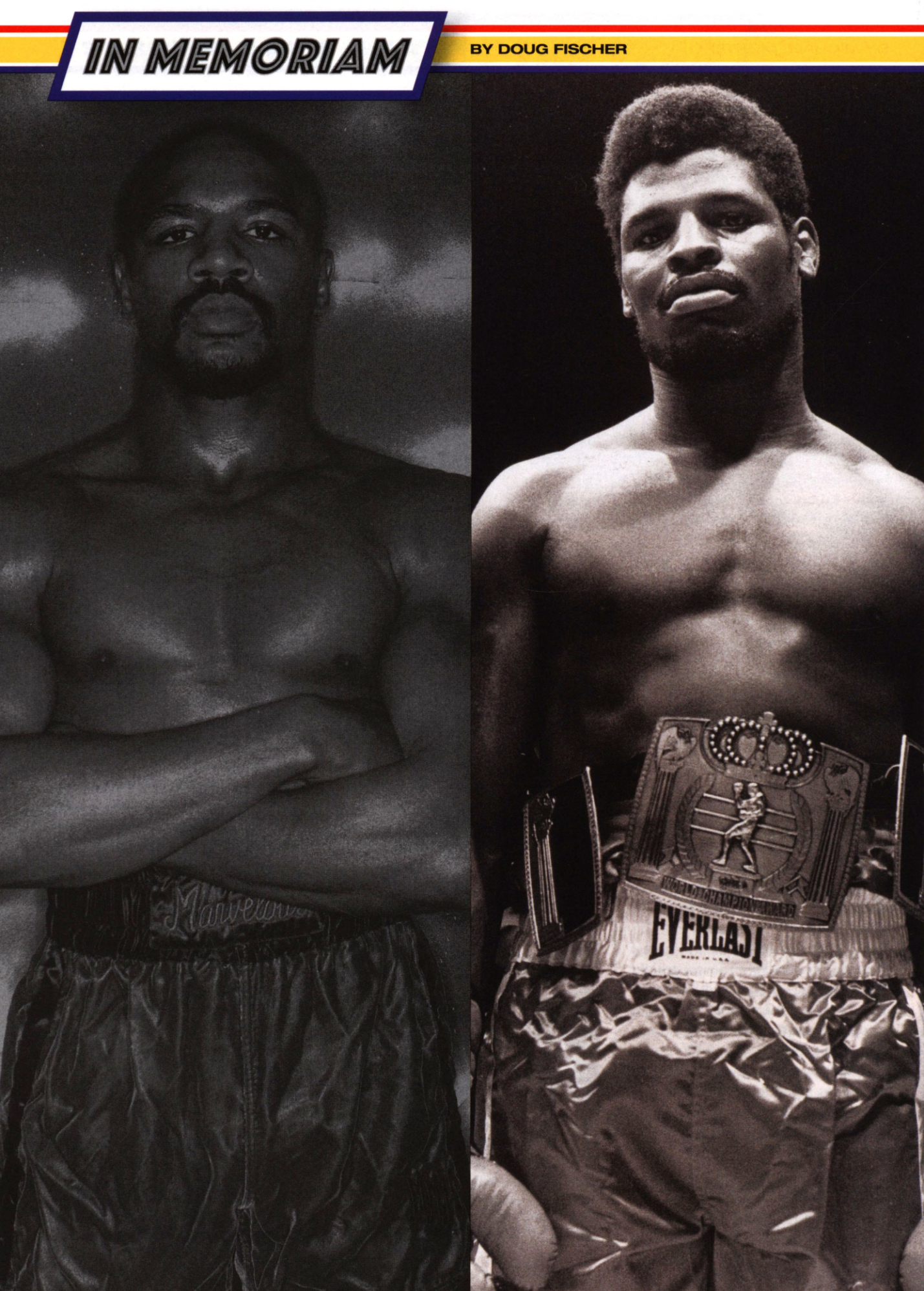
However, those fights, as well as potential showdowns with the likes of Davis, Haney, Lopez and Garcia, all seem highly unlikely in the near future due to promotional and network conflicts. But the cold, hard truth is that nobody seems to be in a hurry to face Stevenson unless they have to, especially after his dominant showing against Herring.

Nonetheless, that performance announced him on the big stage as a legit force in the boxing world. Shakur Stevenson is here, ladies and gentlemen. He won't be going away any time soon. ★

Michael Montero can be found on social media via @MonteroOnBoxing. His show "The Neutral Corner" can be seen every Monday on TheRingDigital YouTube channel and heard on audio podcast platforms around the world.

IN MEMORIAM

BY DOUG FISCHER



The ongoing COVID pandemic had less of an impact on the sport in 2021 than it did in 2020, thankfully claiming fewer lives in the global boxing community than it had the previous year. However, the loss of two former champions – Leon Spinks in February and Marvelous Marvin Hagler in March – set a somber tone for much of the year. Spinks' passing was not a surprise as the former heavyweight champ had been in poor health for years, but Hagler's untimely death was a gut punch from out of nowhere. Although they were polar opposites in terms of their personalities and dedication to the sport, they equally represented a vibrant and genuine era of boxing, one that is sorely missed by fans over the age of 50. The Ring acknowledges their passing and all those connected to boxing who died in 2021 (listed in alphabetical order).

Rashed Al-Swaisat – World youth-level amateur light heavyweight from Jordan.

Vasile Belous – Amateur welterweight standout from Moldova who competed in the 2012 Olympic Games.

Sebastian Eubank – Son of former middleweight and super middleweight champ Chris Eubank and brother of middleweight contender Chris Eubank Jr. Sebastian briefly boxed as a pro.

Marvelous Marvin Hagler – Former undisputed middleweight champion who reigned from 1980 to 1987 and made 12 title defenses, including a 15-round decision over Roberto Duran and a third-round stoppage of Thomas Hearns in an all-time great shootout. Hagler-Hearns was The Ring's 1985 Fight of the Year, and Hagler's controversial split-decision loss to Sugar Ray Leonard was the 1987 Fight of the Year.

Keitaro Hoshino – Former WBA 105-pound titleholder from Yokohama, Japan.

Kirkland Laing – Former two-time British welterweight titleholder best known for outpointing Roberto Duran over 10 rounds in The Ring's 1982 Upset of the Year.

Lehlonolo Ledwaba – Former IBF 122-pound beltholder from South Africa best known for losing the title to a then-unknown Manny Pacquiao in the future Hall of Famer's 2001 U.S. debut.

Gaspar Ortega – Former welterweight contender from Baja California, Mexico, who challenged Emile Griffith for the world title in 1961 (losing by 12th-round TKO) and faced several top-rated welterweights and middleweights (often multiple times) during the 1950s and 1960s, including Hall of Farmers Kid Gavilan, Carmen Basilio, Nino Benvenuti and Tony DeMarco. Ortega won 131 of 176 pro bouts (and was only stopped twice), according to BoxRec.com, and was the father of world-class referee Mike Ortega.

Giovanni Pretorius – Former South African national middleweight titleholder and WBC middleweight title challenger.

Leon Spinks – Light heavyweight gold medal winner at the 1976 Olympic Games and former heavyweight champion. Spinks upset Muhammad Ali for the title in his eighth pro bout, earning a 15-round split decision that was The Ring's 1978 Fight of the Year. Spinks, who lost the title in a rematch with Ali seven months after winning it, also fought Hall of Farmers Larry Holmes and Dwight Muhammad Qawi in title bouts. He was the brother of fellow 1976 Olympic gold medalist and former light heavyweight and heavyweight champ Michael Spinks.

Andre Thysse – Former South African and Commonwealth super middleweight titleholder and WBC title challenger. Thysse, who promoted fights in retirement, faced several future world titleholders, including Mikkel Kessler, Lucian Bute and Juergen Braehmer.

Jeannette Zacarias Zapata – Professional welterweight from Aguascalientes, Mexico.

Taurai Zimunya – Professional junior featherweight from Zimbabwe. ★

(L-R) Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Leon Spinks, Rashed Al-Swaisat, Vasile Belous and Sebastian Eubank

HAGLER: ANTHONY BARBOZA; SPINKS: KEN LOVE; EUBANKS: JACK THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES)

PATIENCE PAYS

FOR CLARESSA SHIELDS, A GROUNDSWELL IN THE U.K. MEANS THAT THE MOST DECORATED WOMAN IN BOXING IS FINALLY SEEING THE FRUITS OF HER LABOR

By **Thomas Gerbasi**

From the outside looking in, you might assume that 2021 was a lost year for Claressa Shields.

Sure, the two-time Olympic gold medalist continued to stack up titles in the pro ring, making history in March with a win over Marie-Eve Dicaire that made her the first fighter (male or female) in the four-belt era to become an undisputed champion in two divisions. But after that victory – which means Shields has won titles at super middleweight, middleweight and now junior middleweight in just 11 fights – there was largely silence when it came to the Flint, Michigan, native and the boxing ring.

Shields is a novice in MMA but a history-maker in boxing.

PFL
PFL

Shields pounds Brittney Elkin to a KO defeat in her MMA debut.

In June, she made her mixed martial arts debut, defeating Brittney Elkin, and returned to the cage four months later, losing a split decision to Abigail Montes. And though Shields did make headlines in November for signing a lucrative deal with Sky Sports and Boxxer, it still seemed like the boxing world wasn't treating Shields with the respect she deserved, given her accomplishments in the ring.

"I agree that they haven't treated me the way that I should have been treated, but I haven't been totally mistreated," said Shields. "I think with my accomplishments that I should have been treated a lot better. I'm an easy person to work with. You just keep your word and I keep my word and we go from there. But I just think that I've been able to stay positive because I knew that this was gonna happen. I knew that I was gonna get a seven-figure deal from whoever in boxing. I knew that I would get paid a million dollars in boxing some way, somehow. And now we're here. I just signed a seven-figure deal with Sky Sports and Boxxer, and I knew that it would come. I didn't know when, but I knew that I was great enough and that I have accomplished enough and that I'm just a really great boxer and a really great person, and I knew that it was coming."

At 26, Shields showed a lot of patience to get to this point. But again, with a pair of gold medals and a stack full of championship belts earned in fights where she was never seriously in danger of losing, you wouldn't think that she would have to go overseas to get the big deal. It's a reminder that as far as women's boxing has come in the past few years, there's still a long way to go. Yet Shields isn't bothered that it was Europe that stepped up to pay her.

"Absolutely not," she said. "I fought on HBO, I fought on Showtime, I fought on DAZN, I fought on Fite TV. I fought on every boxing network you can fight on except ESPN and Premier Boxing Champions. So, with that being said, you know that you're moving up in levels when you're able to make deals in other countries. It wasn't like this was the only deal we had on the table, but it was the best one and it was the most lucrative. So that's why we did the deal."

And in addition to the money involved, the deal, which kicks in with Shields' middleweight title bout against Ema Kozin on January 29, also has the biggest fight in women's boxing attached to it, with Shields facing the only person to beat her in a boxing ring – England's Savannah Marshall.

"My George Foreman is over there in Savannah Marshall," said Shields. "I think every Ali needs a George Foreman. So I'm Ali and Savannah Marshall's my George Foreman, and there weren't any deals I could make in the U.S. that would include Savannah Marshall. So it was great that I'm actually able to go to

Shields claimed two 154-pound titles by outpointing Ivana Habazin.

the U.K., and women's boxing is booming in the U.K. right now. We have so many U.K. versus the USA championship fights, and I'm happy that I'll be able to be one of them. I love what Alycia Baumgardner has done, what Jamie Mitchell did against Shannon Courtenay. And I saw when Mary McGee went over there to try to take the belts from Chantelle Cameron. So I'm happy that I'll be able to be another girl from the U.S. going to show the girls from the U.K. that women boxers are the best in the USA."

Shields laughs, but I have to interrupt to ask her about her belief that Marshall is the George Foreman to her Muhammad Ali. So this will be a one-and-done thing, not like an Ali versus Joe Frazier series?

"I'm gonna smash Savannah Marshall up, and after that she may yell for a rematch to get beat up again, but there's not gonna be no rematches," said Shields. "I'm gonna go over there and beat Savannah Marshall, become undisputed again up at 160, go home and then see what's next. But right now, I have the next fight in front of me – Ema Kozin, who's 21-0 with 11 knockouts, putting her WBF title on the line versus my WBA, IBF and WBC. I look forward to fighting her. I think she's pretty young and pretty aggressive, and that makes a great fight."

As for mixed martial arts, despite her recent loss, Shields is far from deterred from her goal of winning the title of the promotion she fights for, the Professional Fighters League. And though many believe Shields' treatment in boxing led her to pursue a career in MMA, that's not the case. Instead, "T-Rex" switched sports simply for the challenge.

"I just really wanted to test myself, and I haven't really been tested in boxing, but I fought against the best girls," she said. "And I've been boxing so many years, so I really wanted to try something new, and I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do whatever I put my mind to. And I've been able to prove that, and I'm just looking forward to doing more."

But next, it's back to boxing to begin 2022. As for 2021, it wasn't a lost year for Shields. In fact, she would describe it as one of the best of her career.

"2021 was a really good year for me," said Shields. "People see the boxing match and the MMA fights and they just say, 'Oh, it wasn't all that.' And they don't realize that I had to have a very, very great year, so I trained 24/7, I became undisputed champion for the second time, I went to MMA and did great there; now I'm coming back to boxing and just signed a seven-figure deal. And I've got a movie coming out next year (*Lola 2*). I've been able to do some acting, I've got endorsement deals and sponsorships. This has been a really great year compared to 2020, for sure, and I'm happy that it's all just me being patient, me doing what I want to do, and now we're here."

2021 WOMEN'S BOXING AWARDS

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR
Jessica McCaskill

In a year filled with great performances, this was a five-woman race, and what made it so tough to pick between Jessica McCaskill, Amanda Serrano, Katie Taylor, Mikaela Mayer and Chantelle Cameron was that they all had similar patterns to their 2021 campaigns: It was one fight they were supposed to win and one where they were tested by a world-class opponent. (Note: Serrano and Taylor's third fights of 2021 hadn't taken place at press time and weren't going to affect the final pick here.) And while recency bias could easily put Mayer or Cameron in the winner's circle, it's hard to not recognize McCaskill for her achievements. In August 2020, McCaskill, a former 140-pound champion, moved up to 147 pounds and dethroned Cecilia Braekhus for all the welterweight belts. It was a close fight, some would say controversial, but in their March 2021 rematch, there was no such dispute. McCaskill dominated from start to finish, retaining her undisputed title and remaining the only fighter to defeat Braekhus in the pro ring. In December, McCaskill was scheduled to face Argentina's Victoria Bustos, a former world champ on a three-fight winning streak, but visa issues brought in late replacement Kandi Wyatt. Wyatt, though game, wasn't in McCaskill's league, and "CasKILLA" did what a champion does in such situations, as she halted Wyatt in seven rounds, capping off a 12-month run that earned her another title – The Ring's Female Fighter of the Year.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR
Kali Reis vs. Jessica Camara

It was only fitting that New England action hero Micky Ward was ringside for this one, as Kali Reis held off a spirited charge from Canada's Jessica Camara to retain her WBA junior welterweight title and add the vacant WBO strap to her trophy case. Showing the best form of her young career, Camara pressed the action from the start, having plenty of success in doing so, only to get stifled by the experience of the champion as the bout progressed. A late surge by Reis in the 10th round sealed the deal, even though the split decision was greeted by boos from the New Hampshire crowd.

KNOCKOUT OF THE YEAR
Alycia Baumgardner TKO 4 Terri Harper

Alycia Baumgardner's title-winning effort over Britain's Terri Harper goes down in the books as a technical knockout, but this was as clean of a finish as you will ever see. Thankfully, referee Mark Lyson had the presence of mind to stop the fight as soon as Baumgardner landed a flush right hand that froze Harper and basically knocked her out on her feet. It was scary, but it was also the clear Knockout of the Year.

UPSET OF THE YEAR
Alycia Baumgardner TKO 4 Terri Harper

When Harper put her WBC junior lightweight title on the line against Baumgardner in November at Sheffield Arena, it was expected to be just another victory for the unbeaten rising star from Yorkshire, while Baumgardner was seen as a cautionary tale, fresh from knee surgery and one fight since 2019. Then the bell rang, and the former Ring Prospect of the Year put it on Harper for three rounds before ending it emphatically in the fourth.

ROUND OF THE YEAR
Kali Reis vs. Jessica Camara – Round 10

Reis looked like she had nothing in the tank entering the 10th and final round of her fight with Camara. Then she found something and put it on the challenger, opening up a nasty cut over the Canadian's eye before resuming her assault. Gutsy to the end, Camara was able to fire back and stay upright, marching toward Reis with her hands down in exhaustion and landing a left hook before the bell rang. It turns out that Reis didn't need the 10th round to win the fight, but she fought like she did.

TRAINER OF THE YEAR
Rick Ramos

If we had a Manager of the Year award, Rick Ramos might have won that category even easier than this one, but all you need to see from the Chicagoan when it comes to his corner work is the evolution of undisputed welterweight champion Jessica McCaskill over the last several years. Add in the adjustments made between McCaskill's first and second fights with Braekhus to make the rematch even more clear-cut than the initial bout, and the 2021 Trainer of the Year pick wasn't hard to make.

PROSPECT OF THE YEAR
Ramla Ali

The first boxer from Somalia to compete in the Olympics, Ramla Ali turned pro after the 2020 Games in October of that year and has since compiled a 4-0 record. It's the usual course for a prospect, but what separates Ali from the pack is her ability to transcend the sport as a model and activist. Can she fight? Yes. And what's intriguing about the 32-year-old was on display in her recent win over Isela Vera. Vera was wild and reckless, but Ali had both poise in sticking to the game plan and the fire to get into the trenches when necessary to fight her foe off. She will get better, and having Matchroom Boxing to guide her career will only help.

EVENT OF THE YEAR
Nava and Juarez finally meet

In Mexico this was a big deal. Everywhere else, maybe not so much. But in the history of women's boxing, the bout between future Hall of Famers Jackie Nava and Mariana Juarez was the superfight that seemed destined to never happen. But it finally did in October, and sure, it probably wasn't as competitive as it might have been years ago, but in this clash of 41-year-old Mexican superstars, Nava put on a clinic over 10 rounds that proved that "La Princesa Azteca" still has plenty left in the tank.

MOST INSPIRATIONAL
Kali Reis

After a long run of starts, stops and big losses at inopportune times, Reis had the biggest year of her career in 2021, and not just in the ring, where she went 2-0 with victories over Diana Prazak and Jessica Camara. Outside of it, she garnered rave reviews for her starring role in the critically acclaimed film *Catch the Fair One*, all the while doing whatever she could to raise awareness of Indigenous and Native American issues. The rise to the top after some rough sailing was impressive enough. Using the platform she now has to help others is even more praiseworthy.

ED MULHOLLAND

FREDDIE ROACH: BEST I'VE TRAINED

ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED AND ACCOMPLISHED TRAINERS OF ALL TIME CHOOSES THE BEST FIGHTERS HE WORKED WITH IN 10 CATEGORIES

By Anson Wainwright

In a previous life, Freddie Roach was a popular, crowd-pleasing fighter. However, it is as a trainer that he later excelled. Roach estimates he has worked with around 50 world titleholders over the past 30 years.

Roach was born in the New England town of Dedham, Massachusetts, on March 5, 1960.

"Dedham was a great place to grow up," he told The Ring. "My brothers and I played all sports as the seasons changed: baseball, football, ice hockey. We had a park across the street from our house and were all in Little League."

Roach added multiple layers to Manny Pacquiao's arsenal and made him a devastating force.

At an early age, Roach and his siblings were introduced to boxing by their father, Paul, who boxed professionally at lightweight in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

"My dad got me into boxing when I was 6 or 7," Freddie recalled. "We had a ring in our backyard. Dad was

our coach. My brothers and I were very competitive."

It proved to be an excellent foundation for the youngster. Roach enjoyed a solid amateur career, compiling a 41-13 record, mostly as a flyweight. He turned professional as a featherweight in August 1978 and quickly became a local attraction, eventually teaming up with late, great trainer Eddie Futch.

"I learned so much from Eddie," said Roach. "He made me a better boxer and a better fighter. I could see the improvement almost immediately."

Roach's fan-friendly style was made for TV, and he was a regular on ESPN in the early 1980s. He went 26-1 before the hard fights started to catch up with him.

Looking back, Roach's fondest memory is when he faced iconic two-weight world champion Bobby Chacon in March 1985.

"He was an idol of mine," said Roach. "Though I didn't win the fight (Chacon won by majority decision), I did score two knockdowns. He was just a little too tough. But what a great experience."

Roach would also fall short against future titleholder Greg Haugen (TKO 7) and reigning WBC lightweight titleholder Hector Camacho (UD 10) in a non-title bout in December 1985.

Although Roach was only 26, he had lost five of six by the end of 1986 and appeared to have seen better days. Heeding Futch's advice, he retired with a 40-13 (15 KOs) record.

Roach was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at 27 and unsure of his next move. He worked various jobs before accepting an offer to help lighten the load on Futch.

"I was his assistant trainer for five years and he taught me how to be a teacher," Roach explained. "He was the greatest. I think about him often."

But of course Roach was destined to be more than just an assistant.

"Virgil Hill was my first world champion," Roach said. "He [regained the light heavyweight title] in his hometown. That was a lot of fun. And because he was my first champion, I think that may be a big highlight for me.

"But it's like asking a parent to name his or her favorite child. You can't. They're all special. Any time your fighter wins a world title, it's a career highlight."

The fighters he has trained since then include Michael Moorer, James Toney, Steve Collins, Miguel Cotto and Amir Khan. He also briefly worked with Mike Tyson and Oscar De La Hoya. However, it is the work he did with Manny Pacquiao at the Wild Card Boxing Club in Hollywood, California, that he is most famous for.

Having achieved so much, Roach could be forgiven for dialing things back. However, he is still highly motivated and hungry for further success.

"Winning a world title never gets old," Roach said. "But even better is getting the most out of a fighter. To help them achieve or surpass their potential."

Roach, now 61, was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in the non-participant category in 2012 and was named Trainer of the Year by The Ring in 2014.

He graciously took time to speak about the best fighters he trained in 10 key categories.

BEST JAB

VIRGIL HILL: "He had great speed and power. He could knock you out with a jab."

BEST DEFENSE

MIGUEL COTTO: "Always held his hands high and was able to block a lot of punches. He saw everything coming at him. Lots of head movement and feints."

BEST HAND SPEED

MIKE TYSON: "Incredible hand speed for a heavyweight and for a fighter in general. Combine that with great power and he was a handful for anyone he fought."

BEST FOOTWORK

MANNY PACQUIAO: "Fast, fast feet. He was so hard to find because he never stayed in the same place too long. He was like vapor. He'd attack you from every angle and was unpredictable. You never knew where his next attack would come from."

SMARTEST

HILL: "He set traps against his opponents very well. He had great knockout power in his left hand. Most opponents didn't realize Virgil was a [converted southpaw] until it was too late."

STRONGEST

MICHAEL MOORER: "He was a bull and very talented. A southpaw with incredible power in his left hand. One left could end the evening for anyone when it connected."

BEST PUNCHER

TYSON: "No one ever hit me harder when we worked out in the ring, and he was pulling his punches. He was physically and mentally devastating against his opposition."

BEST CHIN

FREDDIE ROACH: "While doing mitts with Mike Tyson, Mike clipped me on the chin. It started getting dark, but I didn't go down!"

BEST BOXING SKILLS

COTTO: "He was just a great all-around fighter with a sound foundation from his amateur days. He worked his tail off every day of training camp. Great attitude."

BEST OVERALL

PACQUIAO: "He has spoiled me forever. Pound-for-pound, the most exciting fighter, the hardest worker and best student I ever trained. An eight-division world champion who held a world title in four consecutive decades. He was always looking to fight the best at their best. He didn't handpick opponents to pad his record. We will never see that again, at least in [this] era."

Fred Sternburg helped make this feature possible. The Ring appreciates his assistance. Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

THE WIZARDS OF OZ

GEORGE KAMBOSOS JR. SHOCKED THE BOXING WORLD BY BEATING LIGHTWEIGHT KING **TEOFIMO LOPEZ,** BUT AUSTRALIA'S TRADITION OF PRODUCING CHAMPIONS GOES BACK TO THE SPORT'S EARLIEST DAYS

By **Don Stradley**

If George Kambosos Jr. had defeated Teofimo Lopez 50 years ago, the Commonwealth of Australia would've declared him a national hero, put his likeness on a postage stamp and launched a new dance craze called The Kambosos Hop. As it is now, boxing isn't quite the mainstream attraction it used to be in Kambosos' home country. But don't be fooled. Australia has a tremendous boxing history and still boasts a sizable fandom. No doubt the Aussies are pondering whether his winning the lightweight championship from the esteemed Lopez was the greatest triumph ever for an Australian fighter.

But before such an accolade can be granted, there's much history to consider. Kambosos' win is merely the latest episode in a saga that goes back more than a century.

At the dawn of prizefighting, when America hedged on whether the vulgar business should be legalized or outlawed, Australia was a thriving fight center. After all, a country that started as a penal colony wouldn't frown upon men hitting each other for money. Sydney, in particular, was recognized as one of the game's leading meccas during the bareknuckle and early glove period. Such pioneers as Bob Fitzsimmons, Peter Jackson and Frank Slavin did most of their early fighting in Sydney. It was also in Sydney that Albert Griffiths, better known in ring annals as "Young Griffo," defeated "Torpedo" Billy Murphy in 1890 for a claim on the featherweight championship.

Griffo was a defensive genius from Millers Point, Sydney. Virtually unhittable, he reportedly could place a handkerchief on the floor, set one foot on it, and dare anyone to hit him. Without removing his foot from its station, he'd duck

tuners edge
COM.AU
In Loving Memory
Papou Kamboses

and weave and twist his torso, leaving his challengers winded and frustrated at their inability to land a blow. Yet he remained unrecognized outside of his country, his title claim unacknowledged. To further his career, Griffo relocated to America. In the coming years, his impressive stateside performances included draws with such legends as George Dixon and Joe Gans. But even as he established himself as one of the era's best, Griffo's stormy personal life brought him down. After more than 220 bouts, he ended up a destitute alcoholic. Griffo died in 1927 at age 56.

Les Darcy, another Australian with plans to conquer the United States, also came to a bad end. Billed as "The Maitland Wonder," the super-talented Darcy moved to America for political reasons as the first World War was underway. He promptly died after a medical procedure at 21. The myth that Darcy had been poisoned by the Yanks may have partly explained why Australian fighters seemed content to stay home during the next several decades.

In fact, there were many reasons for the apparent isolation of Australian fighters. For one, Australia and the U.S. were separated by more than 9,000 miles, which in the days of Griffo meant weeks on a boat. (A journey to London or Paris was just as arduous.) Also, America was grossly overstocked with fighters during the 1920s, '30s and '40s; there was no need to import talent. Conversely, Stadiums Ltd., the firm with a virtual monopoly on Australian boxing, wouldn't pay to bring in opponents. For many years, Australians fought Australians; the rest of the world heard little about it.

When air travel became easier with the advent of the jet age, however, the presence of Australian fighters was undeniable. What follows is a small sampling of some great Australian boxing moments. Was Kambosos' performance any greater than these?

Kambosos earned it the hard way in a brutal and bloody encounter.

NOVEMBER 15, 1952

Rand Stadium, Johannesburg, South Africa • *Jimmy Carruthers KOs Vic Toweel for the bantamweight championship*

More than a half century had passed since Griffo's day, but when it was time for Australia's first internationally recognized world champion to emerge, only a bit less than three minutes were needed. That's how long it took Carruthers, a bright-eyed 23-year-old southpaw from Paddington, to knock out South Africa's Toweel.

In only his 15th professional contest, Carruthers charged out and battered Toweel from the first bell. At a bit past the one-minute mark, Carruthers knocked Toweel through the ropes onto the ring apron. The bewildered titleholder climbed back into the fray but could barely keep his hands up as Carruthers sailed in with another flurry of punches. As the blows rained upon his face and head, Toweel finally crumbled and stayed down for a 10 count, described by the United Press as "a well beaten and crushed champion." The time was 2:19 of Round 1.

Toweel had been the betting favorite. He was more experienced than Carruthers, had won the title from the highly regarded Manuel Ortiz and had already made three successful defenses. Yet Carruthers tore him apart. It was Toweel's misfortune to be in the way of a hungry young challenger, and it was Australia's pleasure to see the crowning of its first champion.

JOE SCARNICI

FEBRUARY 27, 1968

Nippon Budokan, Tokyo • *Lionel Rose defeats Fighting Harada for the undisputed bantamweight title*

If points were given for utter moxie, Rose would've earned a few just for showing up in Tokyo to fight the renowned Harada for the bantamweight championship. Before two Japanese judges, a Japanese referee and a partisan crowd of 10,000, Rose boxed beautifully for all 15 rounds, baffling Harada with his speed and counterpunching. Rose even stopped to trade blows with Harada in the final round.

The scorecards were all close for Rose, though the Associated Press called it 74-67 for him, suggesting the officials were watching the contest through hometown eyes.

Rose, born in the sparsely populated town of Labertouche, Victoria, was the first Indigenous Australian to win a world boxing championship. Winning the bantamweight laurels was enough to earn him recognition as "Australian of the Year," the first Indigenous Australian to win that distinction as well. Rose also secured a recording contract and was soon heard singing on Australian radio.

JANUARY 21, 1969

Royal Albert Hall, London • *Johnny Famechon defeats Jose Legra to claim the WBC featherweight belt*

It took him a few rounds, but once Famechon got his rhythm down, he gave as good as he got from Legra. By most accounts, "Gentleman John" swept the final four rounds, taking a unanimous decision and the WBC featherweight title. He joined reigning bantamweight king Lionel Rose as a titlist, creating a golden period for Australian fight fans. Though Legra's supporters felt he had done enough to retain his belt, the majority of observers felt Famechon had won it with his final drive and thumping body attack.

Born in France, Famechon came to Australia as a child and did almost all of his fighting in Melbourne. The bout with Legra in London was only the second time he'd ventured out of Australia to fight. Short at 5-foot-5 – he gave up three inches in height to Legra – Famechon had a deceptively long reach, nimble footwork, an excellent jab and a willingness to bang away on the inside. Of his 56 career wins, this was without a doubt his biggest.

It was also a major upset, with Famechon entering the ring as a 5-to-1 underdog. A reporter for the Melbourne Age called it the biggest upset in boxing since Muhammad Ali defeated Sonny Liston five years earlier. Such a reaction was understandable. Legra, a Cuban-born dancing master, was a highly rated champion who had already posted 105 wins. Still, this was Famechon's day, as well as a day for Australia.

JUNE 24, 1989

Convention Center, Atlantic City, New Jersey • Jeff Harding stops Dennis Andries for the WBC light heavyweight title

Perhaps no Australian fighter ever snatched victory from the proverbial jaws of defeat the way Harding did one summer night in Atlantic City. There he was, a raw 24-year-old substitute flown in to face Andries, the WBC light heavyweight titlist. It was a great opportunity for Harding, but when you've had only 14 pro fights and your opponent is a gnarly-looking veteran of more than 40 bouts who is nicknamed "The Hackney Rock," you might prefer staying home in Sydney. And for the first five rounds, it appeared Harding had made the trip for no good reason. Andries cut him, broke his nose and knocked him down.

But just when it would've been acceptable for Harding to consider another line of work, he started fighting back. He wore Andries down with body shots from rounds eight through 11, so when the 12th bell rang, Harding came out to face a very tired titleholder. With victory in his sights, Harding put Andries on the canvas twice before referee Joe Cortez stopped that bout at 1:23 of the 12th. Harding's trip to America hadn't been a waste of time, after all.

For trivia buffs, Harding was a late substitute for former titlist Donny Lalonde, who had accepted the bout with Andries but then decided to retire. Andries was unhappy when he learned he wouldn't be fighting the more famous Lalonde and was instead facing a virtual unknown. How unhappy was he once he realized his title was on a flight back to Australia?

JUNE 28, 1991

Mirage Casino, Las Vegas • Jeff Fenech battles Azumah Nelson to a draw

Already a bit of a legend in the lighter weight classes, the dynamic Fenech was ready for his close-up. He was going for his fourth title in a fourth weight class against Nelson, one of the most revered figures in the business as well as the WBC junior lightweight titleholder. If that wasn't enough, the fight was on the undercard of Mike Tyson-Razor Ruddock II, which meant the eyes of the boxing world were on Australia's "Marrickville Mauler." And so it was, with more spotlight than had ever been on him before, that Fenech put forth one of the most blazing efforts of his already great career.

Fenench went toe-to-toe with Nelson for 12 steaming rounds. It was an ugly bout, with Fenech hitting Nelson with everything available to him short of a roulette wheel. He elbowed, butted, kicked and at one point even tossed Nelson to the canvas. The action was more befitting a prison yard than a boxing ring, but Fenech had come to America to make a lasting impression.

Nelson seemed confounded by the Australian's street fighting style but eventually started fouling in return and even opened some nasty cuts on Fenech's face. Both fighters were guilty of punches thrown after the bell, but this kind of warfare favored Fenech, a little cannon of a man designed for inside battling. By the 12th, Nelson seemed done. For good measure, Fenech staggered him just before the final bell, what seemed to be the icing on the cake of a tremendous night for Fenech and Australian fans. When the judges turned in their scores, however, the brutal contest was declared a split draw.

Did Fenech's roughhousing cost him in the eyes of the judges? Perhaps. Regardless of the verdict, Australians knew they had someone special in Fenech. He was never quite the same after this bout, but on June 28, 1991, he was a real fighting man.

Kostya Tszyu is one of the greatest junior welterweights of all time.

JOHN GRUZINSKI

NOVEMBER 3, 2001

MGM Grand Garden Casino, Las Vegas • *Kostya Tszyu defeats Zab Judah to become undisputed junior welterweight champion*

Tszyu was born in Russia but by age 21 had become fascinated by Sydney and was soon an Australian citizen. By the time he fought Judah, he was one of Australia's favorite athletes. The bout was widely anticipated, with each fighter recognized by different sanctioning bodies as junior welterweight titlists. For the first time in 34 years, the 140-pound weight class was going to have a unified champion.

Judah dazzled Tszyu in the opening round and seemed too quick for the man known as "The Thunder from Down Under." But Tszyu's thunder cracked in the second, his right hand exploding on Judah's chin and depositing the New Yorker on his back. Judah got to his feet but couldn't keep his balance. He stumbled in a comical manner and, to the astonishment of the customers, fell a second time. Fearing for Judah's safety, referee Jay Nady stopped the bout and declared Tszyu the winner at 2:59 of Round 2. Nady's choice resulted in a disgraceful post-fight melee where Judah lost his temper. Tszyu, having chalked up another great night for Australia, stood by smirking.

JULY 2, 2017

Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane, Australia • *Jeff Horn defeats Manny Pacquiao for the WBO welterweight title*

It was one of the era's unpopular decisions. The aging Pacquiao threw and landed more punches than Horn and had Horn out on his feet in the ninth round. Yet the judges' verdict was a unanimous decision for Horn, including one lopsided score of 117-111, leaving many fans to wonder if the Australian was aided by some hometown favoritism. And when we say hometown, we mean it: Horn was a native son of Brisbane, born and raised not far from the stadium where this contest took place. The city of Brisbane and the Queensland government had also financed the fight – all the more reason to suspect something fishy had transpired.

Yet there was much to admire about the contest, if only because of the crowd reported as 51,052, a sign that boxing still had a loud pulse in Australia. That the action was solid throughout left fans feeling satisfied, even if the decision sent pundits into spasms of indignation.

Nevertheless, most agreed that the fight had been close. Even those who felt Pacquiao had won wouldn't call the final result an outright robbery. For an inexperienced challenger with only 17 fights to his credit, Horn rose to the occasion, did better than anyone had expected and survived a vintage Pacquiao onslaught in the ninth. "Australians aren't quitters," Horn said after the bout.

We know that by now.

BRADLEY KANARIS

Jeff Horn produced a colossal upset in dethroning Manny Pacquiao.

There have been other great nights for Australian boxers. Rocky Mattioli, the father-and-son duo of Tony and Anthony Mundine, Vic Darchinyan, Michael Katsidis, Lester Ellis, Barry Michael and many others have added to Australia's rich and varied boxing legacy.

Whether Kambosos' win over Lopez was the greatest Australian victory of all is open to debate. Just last year, Lopez was riding high after beating Vasiliy Lomachenko, who was considered a sort of demigod. Beating "Loma" elevated Lopez into the same rarified air. As is usually the case in boxing, there will be some reassessment of Loma, Lopez and the question of whether each had been prematurely glorified. For now, though, Kambosos beat the man who beat the man. That is reason enough to sing his praises in Australia and elsewhere.

IN GOOD HANDS

WITH A HEALTHY SET OF MITTS AND A POTENTIAL SHOT AT AN UNDISPUTED CHAMPIONSHIP ON THE HORIZON, STEPHEN FULTON MAY NOT BE BOXING'S "BEST-KEPT SECRET" MUCH LONGER

By **Joseph Santoliquito**

JOHN GRUZINSKI; (ABOVE) HOLY STEI

Rays from a late-autumn afternoon sun bounce off a worn window sill as Stephen Fulton looks down at his taped hands. He clenches them into fists. His lips press together and his face contorts into a scowl. His eyes bore into the floor of West Philadelphia's James Shuler Gym as the rumble of children departing the daycare center next door resonates through the place.

Fulton gently places his hands into gold-printed sparring gloves. He plants a slender right leg onto the rubber floor tiles. The southpaw twists, banging a hook on a heavy bag, then backs away and shakes his right hand like trying to break free of something.

That something is pain.

For years, Fulton dealt with the same scenario every afternoon he trained for a fight. Now he's about to blow up as the face of the junior featherweight division after beating Brandon Figueroa in a 2021 Fight of the Year candidate. Fulton's victory unified the WBO junior featherweight title he held with the WBC 122-pound belt he took from the "Heartbreaker" in November.

A fighter's hands are his life – and for a time, Fulton's livelihood was being threatened.

"People just don't understand what I went through for years," said Fulton, 27, who has given nine professional fighters – including Figueroa – their first

Fulton says he struggles with the urge to brawl and the need to box.

loss. "My hands were bad for about four years. They would bruise up and it hurt every time I punched something. The Figueroa fight was probably the first time my hands were healthy throughout a fight.

"It was my fault. I would never ball my hands up into a fist the right way. A lot of times I would keep my hands open. I never broke a bone in my body. I never broke my hands. But my hands would hurt."

Aside from his slick footwork and hand speed, Fulton admitted something not many outside of the Philadelphia boxing gym culture knew: He likes to brawl. The problem was he couldn't. He says he had been fighting at about 75 percent of his full capacity because of his aching hands.

Wahid Rahim, Fulton's manager and trainer, picked up on it. He equated it to trying to crack a brick wall with an egg. Rahim relayed to Fulton that a firmly tightened, balled-up fist was equivalent to smashing a wall with a sledgehammer.

"We talked a lot about it," Rahim said. "He would punch and pull back. He had to ball his hands up when he punched. He wasn't doing it. He needed to understand that if he balled his fists up tightly when he punched, the wall may not [immediately] come down, but it will come down eventually.

"He had been punching with open hands for years. It was a habit we needed to break him out of. 'Scooter' won with speed, but he really likes to fight. With the ability to punch or box, it opened the door to beat Figueroa in a lot of ways Figueroa couldn't beat us."

A week after beating Figueroa, Fulton (20-0, 8 knockouts) finally sat down and watched the fight. Perched on the edge of his living room sofa, he cursed out loud at himself. He knew he could have done more.

"A lot more. I made that fight harder than it should have been, because I wanted to please everybody," Fulton said. "Some people doubted I won. I knew I won. I saw I won. I'll admit it was a close fight. I saw I won a lot of early rounds by clean shots. I got accused of holding, but he held me, too.

Fulton says he could have come forward more than he did. He beat himself up over the scores: judge David Sutherland's 114-114 card, which was overruled by judges Tim Cheatham and Dave Moretti's 116-112 scorecards for Fulton.

"In the back of my mind, in the end, I thought I was going to get screwed over; I wouldn't get the decision. I wanted to fight, because I do enjoy fighting. I hate to say this, but I came to the conclusion, 'Fuck trying to entertain.' I have to do what makes me happy and do what's best for me going forward – and that's boxing and using my boxing skills."

What changed him was the frustration of missing out on a WBO title shot in July 2020 when he contracted COVID-19. In January 2021, he widely outpointed Angelo Leo to take the belt he knew was his all along. Six months later, he welcomed his second son into the world.

The mistake many make with Fulton is they confuse his "Cool Boy Steph" nonchalance with ignorance. His overt playfulness can trigger a laugh, but he's very attuned to outside perception.

For example, the reason he wore traditional Mexican clothing for his ring walk in the Figueroa fight was because it was his outfit for their original September 18 date, which had to be switched to November 27 when Figueroa (22-1-1, 17 KOs) tested positive for COVID-19.

"I could be an a-hole, but I'm not, and I don't get recognition because of the weight class that I'm in, and because of how some people see me," Fulton said. "I don't like making things about race. I definitely have to say this about Mexican people coming at me for my Mexican colors: That Figueroa fight was set for September 18, Mexican Independence Day weekend; I wore those colors to honor Mexican heritage. That outfit was already made for Mexican Independence weekend.

"If I'm going to come at someone or something, I'm going to fucking say it. I saw the way Mexican fans were behaving, so I won't wear the Mexican colors anymore. But everyone is so fucking sensitive and making everything into a bad thing, so I won't do it anymore.

"It really pisses me off. That was done to pay tribute to the great Mexican culture. I happen to be a black guy wearing this stuff. It was about paying tribute. When I wore a cowboy hat to the ring to fight a Mexican (Jesus Antonio Ahumada) in Brandon Figueroa's [home state of Texas], no one said anything about that shit."

Though he is in a lighter weight class, Fulton is incredibly marketable. He has personality. He's intelligent. And above everything else, he's a talented fighter. And to quote Fulton himself, he's "not an a-hole."

Stephen Espinoza, Showtime's president of sports and event programming, has plans for Fulton in 2022. First and foremost is a unifying fight between The Ring's No. 2-rated junior featherweight, Murodjon Akhmadaliev, who holds the IBF and WBA titles, and Fulton, now No. 1 at 122 pounds, for the undisputed championship.

"I go back to two, three years ago when I first heard Fulton's name, and I kept a mental note to keep an eye on him with some other younger guys," Espinoza said. "Of that group, Fulton and Chris Colbert were on top of the list. Fulton is a very likable, charismatic guy, but as guys come up, you need to watch how they deal with top-tier talent.

"That's what 2021 was about for Stephen Fulton – finding out how good he is. Now we've seen it over the course of the last 12 months. That the sky is the limit for this kid. He has the complete package. He can come through in the clutch against top-tier talent. I would tend to agree Stephen Fulton is one of the more underrated fighters in the world today.

"This is someone boxing fans need to be more aware of and need to pay more attention to. I've always paid attention to the lighter weight classes. One of my favorite fighters was Marco Antonio Barrera. There is a lot of potential there. They can become mainstream names. They can become mainstream on TV. That's the path Stephen is on."

Espinoza spelled out the goal with a Fulton-Akhmadaliev fight in 2022.

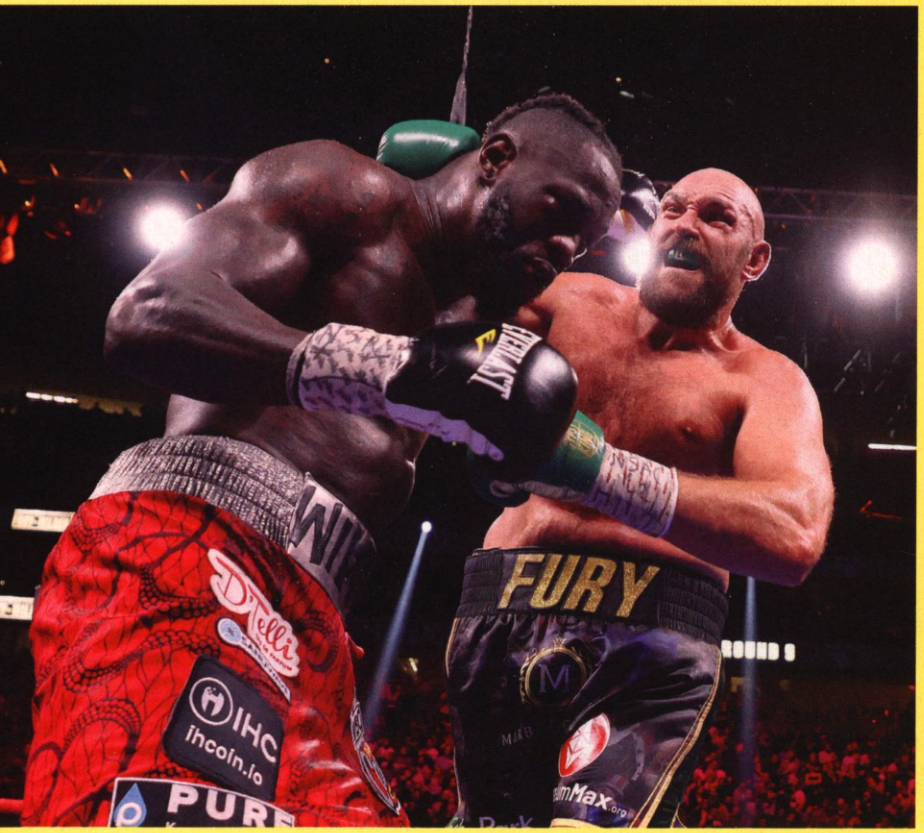
"That could come sometime in the near future," Espinoza said. "Fulton will no doubt be more known this time in 2022. He has the style and boxing skills to do it. When you have a kid this talented, he won't remain a secret for very long. Right now, he's one of the best-kept secrets in the sport, but that is changing every day with the talent and potential he has."

It's a belief Fulton himself is fully committed to. A future he will be seizing with two strong, healthy hands.

Joseph Santoliquito is an award-winning sportswriter who has been working for Ring Magazine/RingTV.com since October 1997 and is the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America. He can be followed on twitter @JSantoliquito.

STEVE MARCUS

WORLD BEAT



Tyson Fury's victory over Deontay Wilder was the highlight of a fruitful U.K. boxing scene in 2021.

U.K.

BY GARETH A DAVIES

The 2021 audit from this side of The Pond reads thus: Tyson Fury, the heavyweight champion, No. 1 in the world; an undisputed 140-pound champion in Scotsman Josh Taylor; and other world champions in Lawrence Okolie (cruiserweight) and Sunny Edwards (flyweight), with Leigh Wood holding a secondary version of the WBA's featherweight title. There are also several contenders to the 175-pound thrones – Callum Johnson, Anthony Yarde, Joshua Buatsi and Callum Smith (who has stepped up from super middleweight since his defeat at the heavy hands of Canelo Alvarez) – yet it is at heavyweight where British boxing has never been as rich, or as deep, at world level. Anthony Joshua will attempt to claim back his belts against Oleksandr Usyk in 2022; Dillian Whyte is set to challenge Fury for the Ring and WBC crowns, expected at a similar time. And Joe Joyce is rising fast, while Daniel Dubois and Hughie Fury are still potential contenders in boxing's blue riband division.

In recent events, in the last quarter of the year, fight and music city Liverpool thumped to the tune of Conor Benn, son of the "Dark Destroyer," British legend Nigel Benn, advancing his cause at welterweight with his 20th straight victory. Katie Taylor, now fighting regularly out of the U.K., saw off a tough, physical opponent in the shape of Firuza Sharipova, the Irishwoman retaining her Ring, IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO lightweight belts. We hope to see Taylor, now 35 and beginning to show more reticence to be a "raging belle," in superfights in the next year, notably against Amanda Serrano and/or Jessica McCaskill, potentially at welterweight. Promoter Eddie Hearn is working away to make those fights a reality.

Kell Brook and Amir Khan – finally, after many years of broken deals and promises – have agreed to meet at 149 pounds in Manchester in an intriguing, bragging-rights fight, with both men at similar stages of vulnerability in their careers in their mid-30s. Oh, too late, say many, but it will be a mighty collision when they meet, indeed belatedly.

At the Copper Box Arena in London, late in the year, Yarde put his world title aspirations back on track when he dismantled and stopped Lyndon Arthur by fourth-round KO, showing an ebullience and fervor he failed to display behind closed doors 364 days earlier, when he fell to "King" Arthur on points. At the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai, Londoner Sunny Edwards beat Jayson Mama by unanimous decision to defend his IBF flyweight title.

There is also the build toward Savannah Marshall facing Claressa Shields in another women's blockbuster at middleweight, which will most likely take place here, after Marshall beat Lolita Muzeya by second-round stoppage to retain the WBO middleweight title. On the same card in Newcastle, Hughie Fury defeated Christian Hammer by fifth-round retirement.

At Tottenham Hotspur's Banqueting Hall, Hannah Rankin

AL BELLO

beat Maria Lindberg by unanimous decision to claim the vacant WBA junior middleweight title. To bring matters up to date in this column, at O2 Arena in London, Chantelle Cameron beat Mary McGee by unanimous decision to claim the first women's junior welterweight Ring championship and unify the IBF and WBC titles.

Arguably the card with the biggest night of upsets – outside Anthony Joshua losing his world heavyweight belts to Oleksandr Usyk in late September – was at the Sheffield Arena. Kiko Martinez, from nowhere, destroyed Kid Galahad by sixth-round KO to claim the IBF featherweight title, midway through a fight the Spaniard was clearly losing. On the same bill, American Alycia Baumgardner secured a fourth-round KO victory over Terri Harper, the Briton losing her WBC junior lightweight title.

In all, there was a powerful return of boxing post-September, with COVID-19 restrictions on crowds lifted, finally, by the U.K. government. Robert Smith, general secretary of the British Boxing Board of Control, told me for this World Beat column: "I think the sport in the U.K. has recovered from the issues remarkably well. We stopped boxing in January this year, suspended it, and then you could see a gradual increase in what we're doing. In February we had four shows, March we had six, April we had four, May we had five, June we had eight, July we had seven, August we had nine. Then, in September, when all the small hall promoters could actually start promoting, we had 33. October there were 32, November 40, and we have by [the weekend of December 18], 27. You can see the dramatic increase from where we were. That's a total of 175 shows, and I think the busiest year we had was something like 272 or 273. Bearing in mind January had no shows, and from February to August it was relatively quiet in terms of shows. It wasn't quiet in terms of the restrictions and procedures we had to have in place. There was a lot of work which we had to do."

Smith added: "When we came back behind closed doors, it was a completely different animal. Promoters had to have bubbles in place and PCR testing. That's changed from September and the bubble system has gone. Who knows what will happen in the new year. I hope we don't have to go back to that. But I think the procedures, as in fundamentals, haven't changed. But certainly the work that has to be done here and by the promoters themselves has increased with regard to the restrictions and the protocols the government have put in place."

Finally, the growth of women's professional boxing merits a large mention. Smith said of the exponential growth of women's boxing: "I think by the end of [2021], we'll have 50-plus female boxers, which is quite remarkable from where we started off. But the amateurs have done well. The London Olympics [in 2012] opened it up for women's boxing with Nicola Adams, Natasha Jonas and Katie Taylor."

Indeed, looking back, Taylor versus Jonas in May in Manchester was, in my view, one of the fights of the year on these shores.

Smith went on: "Although Katie Taylor is from Ireland, she's kind of adopted by us to a certain extent. The quality [of women's boxing] gets better and better. We take the vast majority of our boxers from the amateurs, so if they're getting better, and the GB squad has made amateur boxing in this country better, we bear fruit from that. The GB squad in my opinion is a professional setup where before it wasn't. As long as the amateur clubs are feeding the GB squad, we'll get the best there is."

COVID-19 notwithstanding, I can report, thankfully, that boxing in the U.K. is in rude health.

Gareth A Davies is the boxing writer for the London Telegraph.

HARRY HOW

PHILIPPINES

BY RYAN SONGALIA

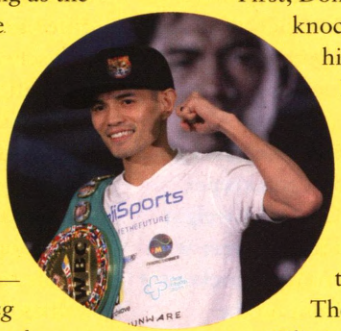
We all knew that the Manny Pacquiao era would end one day. It's a testament to his greatness that we still favored him heavily against a prime, world-class fighter like Yordenis Ugas. We've come to expect that he'd always find a way to overcome the odds, even at age 42. But that day when he'd hit the gas and the wheels would spin in place finally came on August 21, when Ugas used his strong left jab and durability to outlast Pacquiao en route to a unanimous decision. The fight was competitive, but Pacquiao exhibited the telltale signs of a fighter who was past his boxing days, fighting with his hands ahead of his feet.

Pacquiao announced shortly after that he was retiring from boxing and soon announced his candidacy for the 2022 Philippine presidential election.

Whether he'll ever fight again or not, Filipino boxing continues, just as it did before he first elevated it to new heights. Here's a look at some of the standouts of 2021.

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR: NONITO DONAIRE

When Philippine boxing needed a new leading light to look toward, it found it in an old stalwart. That isn't to say Donaire is "old," even at age 39. The Filipino Flash showed he was aging like wine instead of milk, knocking out a pair of previously unbeaten fighters to highlight 2021.



First, Donaire (42-6, 28 knockouts) settled his business with Nordine Oubaali, demolishing the French southpaw in four rounds to win the WBC bantamweight title in May. Then he met fellow Filipino Reymart

Gaballo, outfighting a much younger foe who had admired him while growing up. Donaire took the heavy punches from Gaballo and finished matters with a left hook to the body in Round 4.

Donaire is the rare exception to the rule that fighters shouldn't move down in weight later in their careers, and he's shown himself to be one of the division's all-time greatest knockout punchers. His plan is to seek a rematch with Naoya Inoue, who defeated Donaire in The Ring's 2019 Fight of the Year. Not only has Donaire earned another shot at Inoue, he'd be the Japanese star's greatest threat at 118 pounds.

UPSET OF THE YEAR: JOE NOYNAY KO 5 LIAM WILSON • July 7 - Newcastle Entertainment Centre, Newcastle, Australia

Note to prospects: Don't ruin yourself by facing Joe Noynay. That's the lesson unbeaten (9-0) Liam Wilson learned when he was dribbled off the canvas for four knockdowns before a straight left to the body finished matters. Noynay (19-2-2, 8 KOs) of Paranaque City, Philippines, has established a reputation as a well-traveled upset specialist, having spoiled the unbeaten record of Japanese Olympic star Satoshi Shimizu in 2019. If Noynay is going to make it to the next level, it'll have to be as an opponent. That shouldn't bother him in the slightest, however.

KNOCKOUT OF THE YEAR: MARLON TAPALES KO 2 HIROAKI TESHIGAWARA • December 11 - Dignity Health Sports Park, Carson, California

Marlon Tapales was on the verge of being relegated to a gatekeeper, but the former WBO bantamweight titleholder resurrected his career with a dominant second-round knockout of Hiroaki Teshigawara on the undercard of the Donaire-Gaballo show. Tapales (35-3, 18 KOs) came out ultra-aggressive, landing power punches with both hands to shock the Ring-rated Japanese banger with two knockdowns in the first round. Referee Jack Reiss had seen enough after the third knockdown, which came from a right hook just seconds into the second round. The win puts Tapales into position to fight for the IBF junior featherweight title at some point, and it's a shame that Showtime didn't put this bout on the broadcast.

FIGHT OF THE YEAR: JONAS SULTAN UD 10 CARLOS CARABALLO • October 30 - The Theater at Madison Square Garden, New York City

Did someone say Road Warrior? Jonas Sultan had built his career by coming into foreign lands as an opponent, only to derail the favored fighter's momentum. That's exactly what he did on October 30, when he faced off against previously unbeaten Puerto Rican Carlos Caraballo. Sultan (18-5, 11 KOs) survived a third-round knockdown to drop Caraballo four times, though his margin of victory was only one point on all three scorecards. Caraballo entered the fight with a record of 14-0, all by knockout, and had signed with Top Rank just prior.

"SAYANG NAMAN" AWARD FOR MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: DONNIE NIETES, JOHN RIEL CASIMERO AND JERWIN ANCAJAS

It was a rough year for three of the country's leading lights, for different reasons. Casimero, who was scheduled for a bantamweight unification with Inoue before the pandemic derailed those plans, was supposed to put his WBO belt on the line against Donaire in August. That plan was nixed after Donaire took exception to Casimero's personal insults toward his wife, Rachel, as well as disagreements about pre-fight drug testing. Casimero instead defeated Guillermo Rigondeaux by split decision in a snoozer before having his mandatory defense against Paul Butler in Dubai canceled because he couldn't make the weight.

For Nietes, his issues may be due to age. At 39, Nietes can still crank the engine, but only in spurts. He looked solid in a unanimous decision win over Pablo Carrillo in April, then settled for a split decision against Norbelto Jimenez on December 11 in Dubai. Granted, he should have gotten the decision over Jimenez, but the result isn't the type of outcome that gets people excited for a showdown with Roman Gonzalez.

Ancajas' missed opportunity wasn't his fault. After outfighting Jonathan Javier Rodriguez in an exciting defense of his IBF junior bantamweight title in April, Ancajas finally was set to unify his belt with the WBO title held by Kazuto Ioka in a long-overdue, career-defining bout. That fight, scheduled for December 30, was canceled just weeks ahead of fight night after Japan closed its borders due to the Omicron variant of COVID-19. Hopefully this delay doesn't lead to another series of weak mandatory defenses before he gets another big fight opportunity.

JAPAN

BY YURIKO MIYATA

Tokyo hosted the postponed 2020 Olympic Games over the summer, which brought Japan a historic three medals in the boxing competition, but the professional side of the sport was still hampered in 2021 due to strict government restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 infections.

Promoters who had scheduled huge end-of-the-year events in hopes that the worst of the pandemic would be over by then had to reschedule anticipated fights that had already been announced, including Kazuto Ioka vs. Jerwin Ancajas and Gennadiy Golovkin vs. Ryota Murata.

While the Japanese government had

to tighten its border control as other COVID variants emerged, there's still hope for a prosperous 2022. Golovkin-Murata may come in early spring, and Naoya Inoue's road to bantamweight conquest may go better than it did in 2021. We are still longing for the day that the world-famous Korakuen Hall will be filled again with thunderous cheers.

For now, let's review the highlights of Japanese boxing in 2021.

KNOCKOUT OF THE YEAR
NAOYA INOUE TKO 3 MICHAEL DASMARINAS • June 19, Las Vegas

The Monster's vicious body shots can take down anybody. Tough southpaw Dasmarinas (30-3-2, 20 KOs) was no exception. He twice got up from the canvas somehow, but the third time (from a left to the liver, like the other shots) was just too much. The three-round stoppage was his third appearance in the United States, and even more dramatic than his seventh-round KO of Jason Moloney in late 2020. Inoue (22-0, 19 KOs) made the fourth defense of the Ring Magazine championship with an eighth-round TKO of rugged-but-unheralded Aran Dipaen in Tokyo on December 14 to close out an underwhelming year. We hope Inoue, who holds the IBF and WBA belts, can continue his unification quest in 2022, including a showdown with his biggest rival, Nonito Donaire.

PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR
JUNTO NAKATANI TKO 4 ANGEL ACOSTA • September 10, Tucson, Arizona

The fight with Acosta (22-3, 21 KOs), a former WBO 108-pound titlist, was essentially over in the first round. That's when Nakatani, a 5-foot-7 southpaw, landed a solid left that broke the nose of the Puerto Rican veteran, keeping him at bay until the referee stopped the ESPN-televised bout due to abnormal nose bleeding. Nakatani (22-0, 17 KOs), the only Japanese fighter to win a world title in 2020, was making his first defense in the U.S. after a postponement in Tokyo. Being a pupil of L.A.-based trainer Rudy Hernandez since he was 15, Nakatani is used to American boxing culture and had no problems with his first pro fight in the U.S.

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR
KENICHI OGAWA UD 12 AZINGA FUZILE • November 27, New York City

Four years of rebuilding came to fruition when Ogawa (26-1-1, 18 KOs) won the vacant IBF 130-pound title by scoring three knockdowns against awkward southpaw Fuzile (15-2, 9 KOs) over the distance of a spirited fight. Ogawa regained the same belt that had been stripped from him shortly after his December 2017 decision victory over Tevin Farmer was voided due to his testing positive for a banned substance. Ogawa overcame a one-year suspension and notched four wins (plus a technical draw) to get back to the world stage. His dream during his long climb back up the rankings was to call out the names of his children from the ring as a world champion. He did that on Thanksgiving weekend in New York. And now the Teiken-promoted fighter is in position for bigger bouts having signed a co-promotional deal with Matchroom on the strength of his showing vs. the favored Azile.

ACHIEVEMENT OF THE YEAR
MASATAKA TANIGUCHI TKO 11 WILFREDO MENDEZ • December 14, Tokyo

Taniguchi (15-3, 10 KOs) showed how determined he could be in this second shot at the WBO 105-pound title, redeeming himself from the lackluster effort he put forth against then-titleholder Vic Saludar in 2019. Throughout the all-southpaw contest vs. Mendez (16-2, 6 KOs), who succeeded Saludar, Taniguchi was never intimidated by the Puerto Rican's height and reach advantages and dropped the defending beltholder with a left in the second round. The underdog challenger stayed focused and worked on the body in the later rounds. When he landed a solid left again and cornered Mendez with a barrage in the 11th, the referee, former contender Nobuto Ikehara, stopped the fight. The 96th Japanese boxer to win a world title, Taniguchi shined at the Ryogoku Kokugikan, a national sumo arena where Olympic boxing was held last summer. He shared his triumph with The Ring's 108-pound champ, Hiroto Kyoguchi, his close friend and stablemate.

UPSET OF THE YEAR
MASAMICHI YABUKI TKO 10 KENSHIRO TERAJI • September 22, Kyoto

In his first attempt at a world title, tall and rangy challenger Yabuki (13-3, 12KOs) pulled respected and long-reigning WBC 108-pound champ Teraji (18-1, 10 KOs) into a slugfest that suited his style. An accidental headbutt produced a severe cut (which was ruled to have come from a punch during the fight) across Teraji's right eyelid in the ninth round. The defending titleholder charged forward to finish Yabuki in the next round, but the underdog challenger's right counter turned the table. Teraji was sent to the ropes and suffered a TKO loss that ruined what was to be his ninth defense. An argument emerged over the JBC's ruling on the cut, which led to the WBC ordering a direct rematch. The duel is expected to be set in early spring 2022.

CHALLENGE OF THE YEAR
MASAYOSHI NAKATANI'S NINTH-ROUND STOPPAGE LOSS TO VASILY LOMACHENKO • June 26, Las Vegas

Nakatani's third consecutive bout

in the United States followed a 10-round decision loss to future champ Teofimo Lopez in 2019 and a surprising ninth-round stoppage of Felix Verdejo in 2020. Top Rank offered the fight against the comebacking Lomachenko, who was coming off the loss to Lopez and shoulder surgery, and to his credit, Nakatani tried his best to impose his greater size and noted body attack against the former pound-for-pound king. But Lomachenko was truly sharp in all his skills that night. Still, the buildup to the matchup energized Japanese fans, while Nakatani's brave stand against a future Hall of Famer made him even more appreciated.

CANADA

BY JAMIE REBNER

In 2021, the pandemic raged in Canada, which caused tight regulations regarding public gatherings. As a result, the normally vibrant boxing scene was in the doldrums. The country's two leading promoters, Eye of the Tiger Management and Groupe Yvon Michel, were only able to stage a few shows on home soil, which meant a fraction of fighter activity compared to previous years. So instead of presenting multiple year-end awards in a quiet year, I have decided to focus on one, the 2021 Canadian Fight of the Year, which belongs to Oscar Rivas vs. Ryan Rozicki for the inaugural WBC bridgerweight title.

Earlier this year, the WBC created the bridgerweight division to provide today's smaller heavyweights with an opportunity to compete against men their own size. With its weight range of 201-224 pounds, it falls above cruiserweight and below the average weight of modern heavyweights, which is often between 240-250. The division was named after Bridger Walker, a 6-year-old boy who saved his younger sister from a vicious dog attack in July 2020.

To say boxing pundits criticized the new division is an understatement.

Ryan Rozicki (left) and Oscar Rivas became bridgerweight pioneers.

And it deserved all the derision, because if there's one thing boxing didn't need, it was another division and another belt. But after all the scorn the new division received since its inception, its first title fight was worthy of praise.

The division's first champion, Rivas, is deserving of that moniker because he had to go through hell against unheralded challenger Rozicki in Montreal on October 22 to earn his first belt as a pro. Rozicki was 13-0 with 13 stoppages going into the bout with Rivas, but all those wins had come at cruiserweight, and he had yet to face a legitimate contender in his career. On top of that, he was taking the fight on short notice after Rivas' original opponent, Bryant Jennings, pulled out a month before because he refused to adhere to Canada's quarantine policy for unvaccinated travelers. Despite the odds stacked against him, Rozicki put forth a tremendous performance that saw his stock rise considerably in defeat.

From the opening bell, Rozicki pressed forward and looked to attack his much larger opponent. That made sense, given Rozicki's style as an aggressive brawler and the fact that he had never lost with that approach. But that strategy backfired with 10 seconds to go in the opening round, when Rivas caught Rozicki with a right followed by a powerful left hook that wobbled the Nova Scotia native. Lucky for Rozicki, the bell sounded before he could be hurt again.

Having recovered enough after the minute of rest, Rozicki went back to his strategy focused on aggression and pressure. Rivas was happy to oblige and engage on the inside knowing he possessed greater strength and power. Although Rozicki's punches didn't carry the same pop as Rivas' shots, he compensated with greater volume. And while he wasn't able to stun Rivas, he landed several sharp left hooks in the early rounds that got Rivas' attention.

Midway through the fight, Rivas wisely started to push his smaller opponent back and force Rozicki to carry his weight. But Rivas couldn't keep Rozicki pinned to the ropes long enough to make it count as Rozicki made sure to flurry and change angles whenever possible.

The grueling inside battle continued, with both men consistently digging body shots and uppercuts. In the ninth round, "Kaboom" woke up and started to land stiff jabs that repeatedly knocked Rozicki's head back. Up until that point, Rivas had neglected the jab in favor of swapping blows with Rozicki chest-to-chest. But by increasing the distance between them, Rivas suddenly had a potent weapon at his disposal. The problem was that he was using it as a single punch instead of following it up with combinations.

That is until the 11th round, when more jabs from Rivas led to an excellent combination. First, he nailed Rozicki with an overhand right that set up a massive left hook, which almost separated Rozicki's head from his neck. He then punctuated the combination with a hard right uppercut. Demonstrating his inhuman toughness and granite chin, Rozicki ate those shots like Tic Tacs and fired back immediately. Rozicki continued to press, but he couldn't knock Rivas down or

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out in the final round, which was the emphatic ending he needed.

After a brutal slugfest that exceeded all expectations, Rivas was awarded a unanimous decision over the gritty and resilient Rozicki by two scores of 115-112 and one of 116-111. Who knows what the future holds for the bridgerweight division given the lack of name fighters competing there, but at least Rivas is now the man to beat. Hopefully, that means he can get some meaningful matches sooner rather than later.

Despite losing in his bid for the new belt, Rozicki earned himself some significant opportunities should he decide to move back down to cruiserweight. It's fair to say he gained more from his first defeat than from all of his pro victories combined. Even if it was for the bridgerweight title, the valiant effort he put forth means that boxing fans might remember his name in the future and decide to tune in. And if he has more fans behind him, he might get the matchups he deserves and the paydays that come with it.

In the end, both fighters and the new division came out with more shine than they had going into the inaugural title fight. And they get to take home honors for the 2021 Canadian FOTY.

SOUTH AFRICA

BY DROEKS MALAN

It has been a hard year for South African boxing.

The country lost its only world titlist in April when Moruti Mthalane dropped his IBF flyweight belt to Sunny Edwards.

Then there were the local challenges. Some promoters have tried their best to keep going, but canceled tournaments due to positive COVID-19 tests and various other reasons were the order of the day. Limited live gates of 750 have only been allowed for the first time in December.

Picking a Fighter of the Year is a difficult task.

Three South Africans participated in world title eliminators and one of them got a shot at a major belt.

In March, No. 4-ranked cruiserweight Thabiso Mchunu became the WBC mandatory challenger by outboxing Olympic gold medalist Evgeny Tishchenko in Russia. Mchunu used his experience and awkward southpaw style to befuddle the local man. At times he was even outjabbing his much taller opponent.

Mchunu is tentatively scheduled to meet WBC champion Ilunga Makabu, Africa's only current world titlist, in the new year.

Junior flyweight Sivenathi Nontshinga was the only one who got the opportunity on home turf. He won a hard-fought decision over Filipino banger Christian Araneta to become the mandatory challenger for IBF titleholder Felix Alvarado.

The undefeated Nontshinga showed some versatility by turning boxer, keeping Araneta at the end of his jab and avoiding trouble for most of the fight. Not the whole fight, though; he had to survive a strong finish by Araneta, which included getting up from a last-round knockdown.

Then there was Azinga Fuzile. The popular 130-pounder stopped Martin Ward in the seventh round in Las Vegas in May. That fight earned him a shot at the winner of Shavkatdzhon Rakhimov versus Kenichi Ogawa, who were scheduled to fight for the vacant IBF title. When Rakhimov got injured, Fuzile got the call to step in.

Facing Ogawa in Madison Square Garden in a fight many expected him to win, things went pear-shaped for the South African. He took a knockdown in the fifth and had to survive another two in the last round, barely making it to the final bell. It seemed he just could not get out of the way of Ogawa's right hand. The best thing that can be said about the southpaw's performance is that he showed tremendous heart to last the distance.

The performance against Ogawa knocked a lot of luster off Fuzile's year, so perhaps 2021 belonged to Mchunu for upsetting an undefeated fighter on his home turf.

Picking a Fight of the Year is much easier.

Undefeated junior featherweight Ludumo Lamati kept his "0" intact by winning a 12-round majority decision over Mexican visitor Jose Martin Estrada Garcia in June.

The bout featured nonstop toe-to-toe action with Lamati landing the sharper shots for most of the bout, building up a lead on the cards. Lamati was better when he could create some space but had to pay the price. He took some thudding left hooks to the body as well as cuffing punches to the head when the Mexican got close. Garcia came on like gangbusters in the championship rounds. By the last stanza, he had a bloodied Lamati reeling and getting on his bicycle to see out the fight.

It was a fight to remember that did not deserve a loser.

Prospect of the Year should go to junior middleweight Shervantaigh Koopman, who fought four times this year, bringing his record to 9-0 with six knockouts.

He has shown steady improvement, and more importantly he is getting the right experience. After scoring a third-round stoppage over Junior Makondo to open the year, he went to war against fellow undefeated prospect Jacques Tshikubu Muvud, became the national champion by knocking out Simon Dladla in seven rounds and then went 10 rounds for the first time, winning a decision over gutsy Henriques Lando. Koopman has shown solid technique and the ability to overcome adversity. There are still some rough edges, most notably defense, but the future looks bright for Koopman!

As for Comeback of the Year, former Ring junior flyweight champion Hekkie Budler finally made his return after an absence of more than two years, outpointing a very game Jonathan Almacen over 12 rounds in May. As the fight went by, he gradually began to resemble "The Hexecutioner" of old.

Perhaps he does have another world title run left in him.

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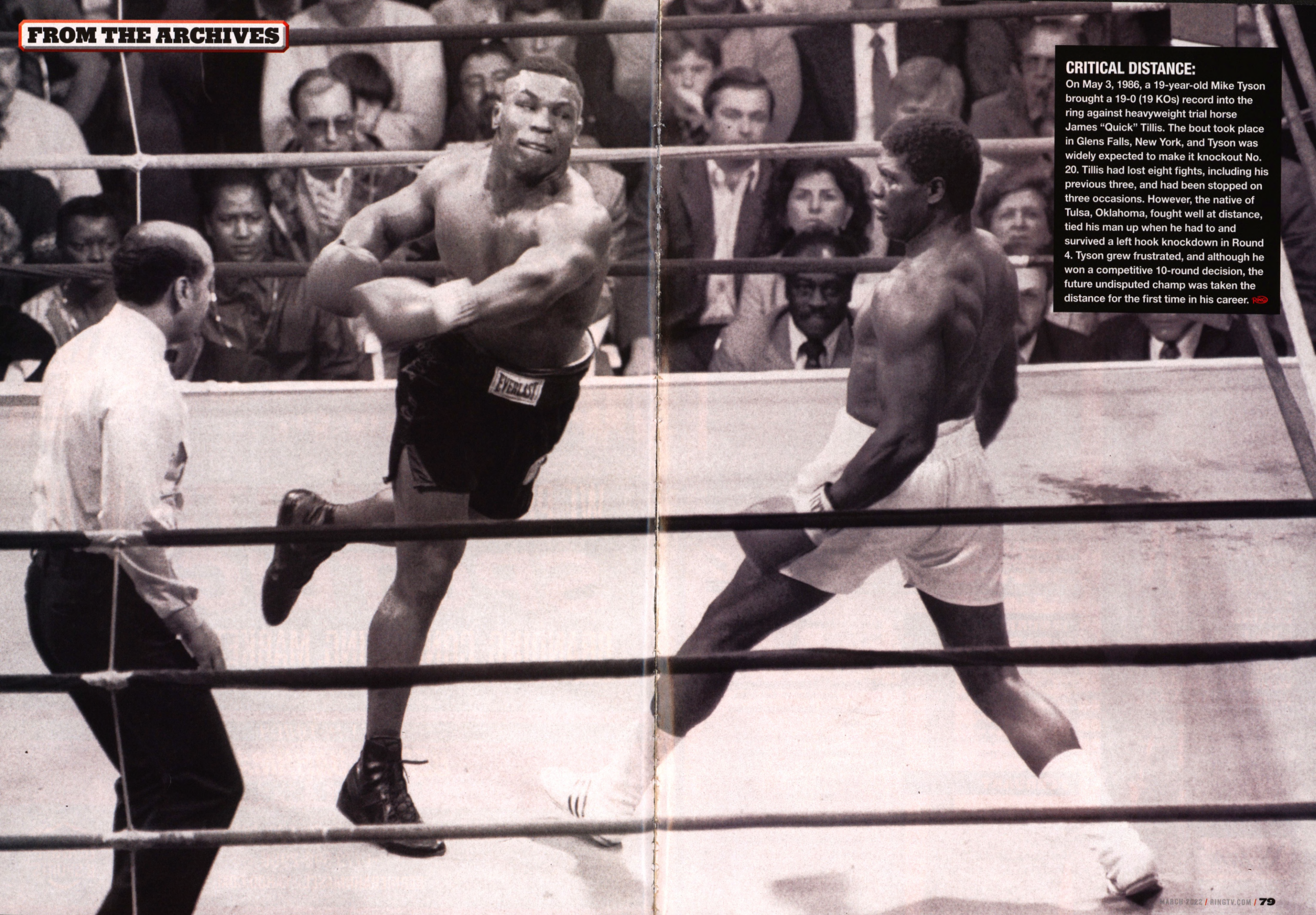

CRITICAL DISTANCE:

On May 3, 1986, a 19-year-old Mike Tyson brought a 19-0 (19 KOs) record into the ring against heavyweight trial horse James "Quick" Tillis. The bout took place in Glens Falls, New York, and Tyson was widely expected to make it knockout No. 20. Tillis had lost eight fights, including his previous three, and had been stopped on three occasions. However, the native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, fought well at distance, tied his man up when he had to and survived a left hook knockdown in Round 4. Tyson grew frustrated, and although he won a competitive 10-round decision, the future undisputed champ was taken the distance for the first time in his career. RING

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COMING UP

Amir Khan and Kell Brook will finally go head-to-head in a long-overdue grudge match in February.

JANUARY

JAN. 29 – Chris Eubank Jr. vs. Liam Williams, middleweights, Cardiff, Wales (Sky). Also, Claressa Shields vs. Ema Kozin, middleweights (for Shields' Ring/IBF/WBA/WBC titles).

JAN. 29 – Ilunga Makabu vs. Thabiso Mchunu, cruiserweights (for Makabu's WBC title), Warren, Ohio.

FEBRUARY

FEB. 5 – Jessie Vargas vs. Liam Smith, junior middleweights, location TBA (DAZN). Also, Srisaket Sor Rungvisai vs. Carlos Cuadras, junior bantamweights.

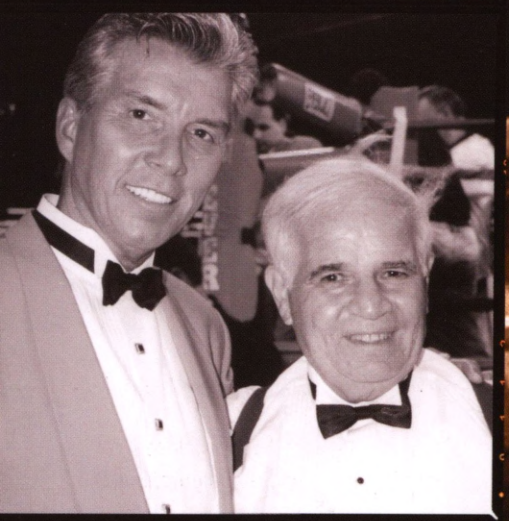
FEB. 5 – Keith Thurman vs. Mario Barrios, welterweights, Las Vegas (Fox PPV).

FEB. 5 – Jose Ramirez vs. Jose Pedraza, junior welterweights, Fresno, California (ESPN+).

FEB. 19 – Amir Khan vs. Kell Brook, welterweights, Manchester, England (Sky PPV).

FEB. 26 – Josh Taylor vs. Jack Catterall, junior welterweights (for Taylor's Ring/IBF/WBA/WBC/WBO titles), Glasgow, Scotland (ESPN+/Sky).

FEB. 26 – Jermell Charlo vs. Brian Castano, junior middleweights (for Charlo's Ring/IBF/WBA/WBC and Castano's WBO titles), Houston, Texas (Showtime).



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